

Saving Jesus from the Church

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Inaugural Lecture in Progressive Theology By Rev Dr Robin Meyers

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Thank you for bringing us here, to this far away and beautiful place.

We live in Oklahoma, and Oklahoma is a strange place—(the name itself means red man) and politically and theologically it is the reddest of the red states in America. Dominated by the Republican Party, and the Southern Baptist church--but also a place where I have served the same Congregational UCC church for 30 years—a church which advertises itself as “*Unapologetically Christian and Unapologetically Liberal.*” So perhaps what they say is true: “All things really are possible for those who love the Lord!”

Let me begin by saying what I think is the number one cause of the decline of the church in our time: It is, in my opinion the timidity of clergy. (Now I’m gonna exempt Margaret from these comments!) Clergy are killing the church by our lack of courage and intellectual honesty. We are busy rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic while people connect online or at the local coffee shop. Church just doesn’t seem relevant to them, much less dangerous. Nine churches on average, close their doors every day in the United States. We live in a post-modern, post-denominational, post-creedal, and even for many, a post-Christian world. For some this is tragic. For me it is exciting, because I would like to be part of what is coming next.

Besides, we have lost our way (and I use the word way advisedly). Once the followers of The Way were hunted down and killed, now we do the killing, often in the name of Jesus (I’m waiting for the first U.S. drone to be named the Corpus Christi). Turn the other cheek has been traded in for preemptive war and the gospel is now in many quarters a get rich strategy. Once the Jesus People created an underground, anti-imperial movement that although tiny constituted an unacceptable threat to the Roman Empire. That is until by the fourth century Constantine had arranged a marriage between the bride of Christ and Caesar, and ever since we have been the defenders of the status quo, now on behalf of the Pax Americana.

How on earth, I wonder, did followers of Jesus, who counseled us to pray for our enemies, love the stranger, and protect orphans and widows become the voting base for a major political party in America that can be depended upon to pray from the death of our enemies, to exploit our fear and mistrust of the stranger, to cut programs that help orphans and widows, and to make life miserable for gays and lesbians? Mark Twain was right when he said that if Christ were to return today, one thing he would certainly not be is a Christian.

One of my frustrations with the church these days is that I hear so little preaching that has anything to do with what is actually going on in the world. We seem to have lost our prophetic voice completely. A few years ago, when scientists determined with irrefutable evidence that the level of carbon dioxide in the Earth’s atmosphere has passed the dreaded 400 parts per million, the so-called “tipping point” for global warming, the article appeared on the front page of the NYT’s.

On the day the story broke, which is arguably the most important story for the future of the human race, not a single national or local news program reported on it. They didn't even mention it—perhaps because news divisions are now part of the entertainment divisions of major corporations and what dominates our newscasts these days involves celebrities and athletes (often one and the same), and what they tweeted recently. One of these days, our grandkids (and I have two) are going to be asking what in the world we were doing while the planet was heating up. The answer, to quote the marvelous book by the same title by Neil Postman: We were “*Amusing Ourselves to Death.*”

The church should be the one institution in society that can be depended upon to say what must be said—anytime, all the time-- marching to the beat of a different drummer—the Jesus Drummer if you will. So when people ask me if I am hopeful about the future of the church I say—well, I'm not optimistic, but I am hopeful. That's because in the church we know the difference between hope and optimism. Optimism is often just a thinly disguised form of selfishness, a marketing strategy, or a pep talk—what Ken Wilber called “the ego in drag.” While hope, as Emily Dickenson put it, Hope is the thing with feathers/That perches in the Soul/And sings the tune without the words/And never stops at all.

Years ago, when I was still in seminary, the late William Sloane Coffin Jr. shocked us all when he said that he believed that America might very well go fascist in the next 30 years (and that was 30 years ago) Fascist? Surely not. That's such an ugly word. But Coffin wasn't talking about Nazis. Rather he was talking about the broader definition of fascism which can take many forms, but whose essence is this: control of the government by special interests with the blessing of the church. Yikes.

He was talking about the cross wrapped in the flag, and rule by multinational corporations which control the political process and manipulate the minds of consumers with petty nonsense so that we do not think about the fact that our democracy is really becoming a plutocracy, or more accurately perhaps, a Corporate-ocracy. It was George Orwell, as you recall, in class book, 1984 (the most prophetic book ever written), who portrayed thought control as being accomplished in part by having screens everywhere, what he called, “telescreens” that pumped propaganda into us disguised as news--“Fair and balanced,” of course. Yikes.

So my question is where were the preachers in my country when the Supreme Court ruled in the Citizens United case (which may turn out to be the worse high court ruling since *Dred v. Scott*) that corporations are people who can form superpacs and give unlimited amounts of money to campaigns and keep the identity of their givers secret? What good is a pulpit, after all, if you can't be free to say, “*Hey, would any of us recognize a corporation if we met one walking down the street?*” How absurd.

Isn't this exactly what you would do if you wanted to destroy a democracy from within? This year, as we pick a new president, two billionaire brothers from my hometown of Wichita, Kansas, Charles and David Koch, will spend more money – just the two of them - to see that their candidates wins than is spent by the entire national Republican Party.

Now nothing is what it appears to be, and facts do not matter. In fact, we are living in the United States in a fact-free political environment. Recently a U.S. Senator lied about Planned Parenthood in a speech on the floor of the House, claiming that 90% of what PP does is abortion (in fact it's only 3%, a mere 87% mistake). His office apologized the next morning with perhaps the most frightening explanation I've heard about an elected official: “*The senator was not intending to speak factually on the matter.*” Well, of course not, he's just a senator.

You know, we often criticize our ancient ancestors for living their lives under a cloud of superstition and myth, but we are no different. We live by our own myths. We say things in America like, *“The tea party is a “grass roots movement.” “Supply side economics is good for the middle class.” “Asking the rich to pay their fair share of taxes is class warfare.” “Woman can’t be trusted anymore to make decisions about their own bodies.”*

Politics in America has become one more form of entertainment in a celebrity culture— why else would anyone care what Donald Trump has to say? Donald Trump – we’re just as scared as you are – he is the presumptive nominee of the Republican Party in the United States for the most important and dangerous job in the world, is the most unqualified and mentally unstable person ever to run for the highest office in the world.

“You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free” said Jesus. Well, perhaps the opposite is also true. *“You shall know how to lie and those lies will imprison us all.”*

As the gap between rich and poor has now reached its highest level in American history, and one in six Americans lives below the poverty line (and one in four children can’t be certain where their next meal is coming from), what do we hear? What do we hear from the church of Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, the man of boundless compassion for the weak and the dispossessed?—mostly we hear arguments over abortion and gay marriage.

In the run-up to our disastrous war in Iraq, with the help of Tony Blair, how many sermons were preached around here calling for us to step back and consider the moral justification for a pre-emptive war based on non-existent weapons of mass destruction? Where were the preachers in America when we dismantled our most cherished judicial beliefs at Guantanamo Bay? Did they fear sounding *“weak on terrorism even though we all claim to worship a God whose power is made perfect in what—in weakness?”*

Where were preachers when Americans were being spied on by our own government, or when a discussion was taking place at the highest level about whether or not we should torture prisoners or send them to other countries to be tortured? When was the last time that a church was a thorn in the flesh of the Empire – either in America or Australia?

The answer is. We are now part of that Empire, and we have become, in the world of Harvey Cox, its *“compliant acolyte.”* We bless soldiers and we curse conscientious objectors as if it is the job of the Beloved Community to serve as a kind of military chaplain to the Empire. When, for example, was the last time you heard a sermon in which a preacher lamented the fact that in America we love sports more than we love children? (It’s very easy to prove, by the way!) How do we know this is true? Because the United States now has the best sports stadiums and the worst public schools in the world.

Jesus the Prince of Peace? It doesn’t seem to be getting through. 86% of Americans claim to be Christians but we are the most violent society in the developed world. Our games are violent, our movies are violent, our political process is violent, and our homes are violent— especially for women. And we worship the warrior as if our cause is always just and we know what is best for the rest of the world.

If a pastor believes this, then it ought to be in the sermon. What good is it to send someone to seminary if you refuse to hear what they learned when they graduate? Important things like how we really got the Bible, and about all those other so-called gnostic gospels that got left out and declared heretical. About the astonishing fact that there are more discrepancies in the copies of copies of copies of New Testament manuscripts than there are words in the New Testament.

That apostles named Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are not likely to be the actual names of the people who wrote them, but were almost certainly written by Greek speaking elites who lived decades later and borrowed (some would say forged) those apostolic names in order to have their work taken seriously. That Jesus, Paul, Matthew, and John all represent very different approaches to faith, or that most of the doctrines we say define Christianity (the divinity of Jesus, the Trinity, the Blood Atonement) are all inventions of still later theologians. Should people know this? Of course they should. And they can handle it! Can they handle it? Of course they can. They are adults. If some of them end up leaving the church in a huff, it might be the best thing that could happen to those who left behind.

And may I say this to the women present—how long are you going to be silent, when the world, encouraged by a patriarchal church, and patriarchal values, continues to treat you as second-class citizens who cannot make choices for yourselves? Do you know where the church would be without women? It wouldn't exist! According to the gospel story, women were last at the cross and first at the tomb, and no church that I know of could possibly survive without them!

So here is the problem. In a world now completely run by corporations, we are running out of independent voices. If not the church, then what other institution in our society is going to get up and say, in the spirit of The Emperor's New Clothes: the Emperor is naked! The naked truth is that many Americans have resurrected the philosophy of Ayn Rand, where everyone is on his or her own, and the so-called "producers" shall never be burdened by the so-called "moochers." So, what I want to know is - whatever happened to the Common Good? The Common Good is what Jonathan Winthrop meant by a "City on a Hill."

Ronald Reagan took that famous phrase out of Winthrop's sermon, out of context, adding the word "shining" - as in "*America is a shining city on a hill*," and made it sound as if Winthrop was saying that the whole world would look up to America and be envious of us - a shining city on a hill - and want to move here. But what Winthrop was saying what that everyone was watching us, and that if we fail to be our sister and brother's keeper, we will fail the whole world. (Slightly different message!)

As for the early church, the first Jesus People, those supposedly orthodox, well-behaved, salt-of-the-earth pilgrims—they were apparently busy doing things that we would find truly frightening: For one thing, it was obvious that the word socialism had not been invented yet as an all-purpose epithet: Listen to Acts 4: "*Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common . . . There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.*"

That sounds positively Marxist to me! I mean - everything was owned in common? There was not a needy person among them, and they redistributed wealth? So, why has the word "liberal" which is the essence of America's amazing experiment in democracy, now become a dirty word? Liberal - the L-Word as we call it in Oklahoma - the L-Word has become a religious and political obscenity. But if you look it up in the dictionary it means open-minded, tolerant of divergent opinions, and exceedingly generous. So, I would hope that more us might be more liberal.

A next-door neighbor of ours, an elderly woman was talking to my wife the other day, and she asked her, quiet earnestly, if it was true what she had heard, that I was a liberal. "*Is it true*," she said (and it's very hard for Oklahomans to say the word "liberal"), "*that your*

husband is a liberal?" And when Shawn responded that yes, it is true, the woman just shook her head and said, *"But he seems like such a nice man!"*

In Oklahoma, one is either a Christian or one is a Democrat, but one cannot be both at the same time – that would be peculiar. We love football, country western stars, and anyone in a uniform. We live in the land of big hair and what Ernest Hemingway called, *"broad lawns and narrow minds."* We have more pick-up trucks than people, and lots of Hummers, at least one of which I saw sporting a bumper sticker after the invasion of Bagdad that read: *"Powered by Iraqi Blood."*

But here's the irony of ironies. In Oklahoma, we all agree on one thing: We love Jesus. I mean we really, really, really love Jesus. The evidence is everywhere--on bumper stickers, on billboards, on downtown skyscrapers which leave on certain office lights at night during Christmas season to form huge illuminated crosses that mark us as a Christian City--just in case there are any non-believers driving by on interstate who might need to be reminded that they are all going to hell.

"Jesus is the reason for the season. Put Christ back in Christmas. Got Jesus?" Where I come from, Jesus is like a rock star, or a brand of running shoe. In fact, it finally occurred to me that what we really done is turn Jesus into a form of neutral energy, like an gasoline additive—like STP— something that you just add it to your tank to help you get wherever you were going faster and with fewer knocks. But no-one asks *"Where're you going?"*

Sometimes in the church I wonder if we have confused courtship with discipleship—being a fan of Jesus with being a follower of Jesus. Because the best kept secret in the southern United States is the inverse relationship between regional religiosity and bad social statistics. In Oklahoma we have more churches per capita than just about anyone, but also among the highest rates of teen pregnancy, divorce, domestic violence, substance abuse and abject poverty in the country.

It's almost as if the more unrealistic is the approach to religion, (and this is why progressive Christianity is so important), it's almost as if the more unrealistic is the approach to religion the more it resembles a fairy tale, the sooner comes the stroke of midnight. Or treat people like children and they act like children. Take weddings for example. Over the years I've come to see a direct correlation between the big, blowout wedding ceremony, complete with "bridezilla" who makes everyone miserable in order to have "the perfect wedding" she read about in a magazine--and how long that marriage is likely to last. It's like the church these days: all show, no go.

Now I know what you are thinking? It sounds like I really don't like living in Oklahoma, so what don't I just move? Maybe to Sydney? It's beautiful! But to be honest, I've met some amazing and wonderful people in Oklahoma.

On the high plains, where you can see the horizon, we have a kind of hybrid vitality shaped by adversity. It is, after all, the land of Will Rodgers, Carl Albert, Jim Thorpe and Angie Debo. A civil rights activist from Oklahoma named Clara Luper organized the very first lunch counter "sit ins" in Oklahoma City at the dawn of the civil rights movement. We are the Okies immortalized by John Steinbeck in *The Grapes of Wrath*—survivors of the Dust Bowl, the worst of hard times, and in Oklahoma there are some of the hardest working, most generous people who ever walked the face of the earth.

And besides, for a liberal preacher, let's face it—Oklahoma is the mission field! Why go to a third world country to talk about Jesus when you can talk about him in a place where everyone already loves him— but would have him arrested immediately upon his return!

Over a decade ago, a New Testament professor from my alma mater, Phillips Theological Seminary, invited to join that remarkable and controversial group of historical Jesus scholars that go by the name, The Jesus Seminar--and that has been an enormous blessing. It's why I'm here tonight. Not only because it is fun to hang out with Dominic Crossan, the late Marcus Borg, Brandon Scott, Jack Spong, Karen Armstrong, and Elaine Pagels, (in small groups, mind you) just to mention a few, but because it is stimulating to hear scholarship in pursuit of the truth, not in pursuit of any sectarian or ecclesiastical agenda.

Sadly, however, there are not many pastors who are invited to be fellows of the Westar Institute. So, sadly, scholars do their work in their ivory towers, and pastors do their work in their parishes - and never do the two seem to get together in the same room. Yet pastors need the work of scholars and scholars need the real-world experience of pastors. Because all of us are in pursuit of the same thing: the truth in service to a Galilean sage.

This can make you into a heretic, of course, but that that word, "heretic" only means "to choose." And I choose to believe that, given what scholars have helped me to understand, the leaders of the church turned a Galilean sage into a supernatural savior, and have now largely replaced faith in the radical practice of unconditional love with intellectual assent to theological propositions which Jesus never uttered and which often conflict with, or reverse the teachings of his earthly ministry.

Now we are living through the moment that has rightly been called a new Reformation. The church finds itself holding what the late Phyllis Tickle compared to a "*giant rummage sale*." I love this metaphor! It's as if church people are going through a lot of old stuff in the attic, asking difficult questions about what to keep and what to throw away. Millions have decided that the church would rather die than throw anything away, so they have walked away, joining what Bishop Spong calls one of the largest demographic groups in America: the church alumni association.

Let me give you one example of how cutting-edge biblical scholarship could impact the church in a positive way if pastors would tell the truth. Many of the things that students were taught in seminary about the early church until very recently were defective in at least three important respects. First, I was taught that there was something amorphously called "*early Christianity*" and that the closer one gets to the beginning, the more orthodox everyone was. It was only later, I was told, that heretics infiltrated the church and led it astray.

Second, I was taught that the concept of "*apostolic authority*" took shape right away, as did the creeds and hierarchies that seemed necessary to combat these assaults from heretics.

Third, I was taught in seminary that although the Roman empire formed the political and cultural locale in which the early Christians lived, it was mainly just the "background" and, except for the persecutions and the martyrs, had little to do with how early Christian leaders shaped their own ideas and actions.

All three of these assumptions have now proven to be erroneous. In fact, they are dangerous myths. First, there never was a single "*early Christianity*." People argued over the nature of the divinity of Jesus from day one, they argued over what happens to us when we die. They argued over whether to accept Gentiles and pollute the Jewish gene pool. What about circumcision? What eating meat that had been offered to idols? What about the role of

women? What will happen to the Jews who don't accept Jesus? They argued all the time – and yet the idea of orthodoxy and heresy as we understand those words today did not exist.

Second, it was not the apostles themselves who invented the idea of apostolic authority, but rather subsequent generations of ambitious church fathers, and they invented it to secure their own positions of authority and power in the church. Both the creeds and the all-male hierarchies emerged much later in the church than had been previously thought.

And last, but not least, is myth number three. An essential key to comprehending the earliest Christians, including those who wrote the New Testament, is to see their movement as a self-conscious alternative to the empire that tyrannized them. These Jesus People were anti-imperial and they paid for this resistance with their lives. They were so dangerous, in fact, such a thorn in the flesh of the Empire, that they had to meet in secret for decades as an underground movement, scratching the location of their secret meetings on the doorpost with the sign of the fish. Because it used to be dangerous to be a Christian. Now, it is often just boring.

According to I Corinthians 15, Paul did not believe in a physical resurrection, even though he wrote the earliest material in the New Testament? The supernatural accounts of the birth of Jesus were not added until either the eighth or ninth decade of the first century? As to the virgin birth, Paul only refers to Jesus as “*born of a woman*,” (which covers most of us) and Mark's gospel, the earliest of the four, has no birth stories at all.

As to this claim that Jesus was “born of a virgin” and a “son of God” those claims were a dime a dozen, and were used most notably to describe the Caesars – they were virgin born sons of God. Which is exactly what made the claim of the church so audacious—they made it about a penniless rabbi from Nazareth. They stole the honors given to Caesar gave them to a nobody from a backwater town out of which nothing good could ever come! So while we are still arguing over the biological implausibility of the virgin birth, we miss the deeper point that this is how a first century Jew would describe someone who seemed remarkable, born of the spirit, not of the flesh. And to say that Jesus was born of a virgin and a son of God was to make clear that you were loyal to a very different ruler, and that you were going to exercise a very different form of power, and a very different vision of the future. And Rome was not amused!

I have always wonder what it would be like to travel back in time and drop into to one of those first and second-century gatherings of the Jesus people - what was called “The Way.” Scholars tell us that what we would discover is that there was, in fact, no standardized theology, no single pattern of governance, no uniform theology, and no commonly accepted scripture. So the obvious question: what held them together?

Apparently only one thing united these otherwise disparate underground gatherings—the profession of loyalty to the way of Jesus-- the Jesus ethic, if you will, which was the upside down world of the Sermon on the Mount and the Beatitudes--a new order which he had established by his life, death, and resurrection.

“Jesus Christ is Lord!” they dared to say—which meant, quite simply and quite subversively, that Caesar was not. And that was a very dangerous thing to say!

These Jesus People were a joyful but hardly homogenous. Some emphasizing the historical Jesus, others the universal Christ, still others, a mystical inner Christ. But there were no clergy as we know them today, and as for worship, it was a common meal to which the poor were invited, prayer, singing, and reading whatever they could get their hands on, if

anyone in the group could read. All were baptized, though by different methods after a long period of training, sometimes lasting up to two years. And get this - after baptism in the early church, one became, for all practical purposes, a pacifist--refusing to wear the uniform of any army.

Just think how things have changed. Christianity was not in the beginning a belief system, but was instead a peculiar way of being in the world in which the Jesus People embodied love and practiced radical hospitality. For example, here is one of the things I learned by hanging out with those Jesus Seminar scholars.

Did you know that in the Sermon on the Mount, the most famous sermon ever preached, there is not a single word in it about what to believe? Not a word! There are lots of words about what to do—how to be in the world--but not a single word about what to believe.

Fast forward to 325 C.E. and the infamous Council of Nicaea, where Constantine got his quarreling Bishops together and demanded that they come up with a creed so that everyone would know what a Christian “believes.” What came out of that council of course was the Nicene Creed, and for over 1,700 years it has been recited by Christians in worship. Guess what, if you read it carefully, you will discover that there is not a single word in the Nicene creed about what to do or how to be in the world—but only words about what to believe.

That’s no small change! It’s what I call the Great Reversal—and I think we need to reverse the reversal—so we can go, if you will, “back to the future.” When people ask me to give them an example of how, over time, Jesus became more supernatural based on the scripture we have, that’s not hard to do. Jesus of Nazareth grows more supernatural and less human from the first gospel, Mark, where he says, “*Why do you call me good, no one is good but God alone,*” to the last gospel, where he is reported to have said, “*I am the way and the truth and the life and no one comes to the father but by me.*”

But there is an even more dramatic example. Just consider the difference in the New Testament accounts when it comes to the moment at which Jesus becomes the Son of God. For Paul, the earliest writer of what ended up in the NT, Jesus becomes the Son of God at the resurrection. God “adopts” Jesus Son of God when he raises him from the dead.

For Mark, written 15 to 20 years after Paul, when does Jesus become Son of God? It is while standing in the Jordan River being baptized by John as grown man. Now go another decade or so later, when Matthew and then Luke write their gospel, when does Jesus become Son of God? At his miraculous conception. Notice we keep going back in time (from resurrection to baptism to conception).

And finally, when John writes the last gospel, around the turn of the century, when does Jesus become Son of God? He has always been Son of God – he was pre-existent with God, he grew up in God’s house! He was there from the beginning of time. Take that, Jews! You’ve got Moses, we’ve got Jesus! “*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God . . . and the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory as of a father’s only son . . .*”

So, the church has work to do. If we have promoted Jesus into a deity that we can worship but hardly to expected to emulate (mere mortals that we are), then we may actually need to demote him by the return of his humanity so that can again worship the Loving God to which he pointed us through the mystery of what we call the incarnation. Rudolph Bultmann put it well many years ago: “*Jesus came preaching God, and the church came preaching Jesus.*”

We don't have to agree with each other on everything before we can love each other, or do common mission work on the things we do agree about— there are many things that we do agree about - that hungry people need food, that the world is too violent, and that the planet we live on is perishing.

I have a modest proposal (at least in America) for calling a truce on the incessant and tiresome arguments over the so-called culture war issues. If you don't believe abortion is ever moral under any circumstances, then under no circumstances should you ever have an abortion, or counsel anyone else to have an abortion. But I cannot believe that this is ever a decision that any one of us should ever make for any other woman, given all the circumstances under which women become pregnant. Likewise if you oppose gay marriage, that's fine—just refrain from actually marrying a gay person. Just say no. Just say no. But remember that marriage is about covenant, not about gender, and who are we to tell two people who love each other that they are forbidden to embark upon the difficult but life-giving adventure that is marriage? Who are we?

But let me pause for a warning to all of us who call ourselves progressives. Liberals have their own set of hyper-intellectual problems. Indeed, in many a cerebral crowd there lurks a dangerous illusion. Namely that religion is mostly up here in the head, and that if we think a good, and clever thought, we have done a good and clever deed. For pastors, this is especially important – we preach a good sermon series about love and confuse it with the act of actually loving people, especially the ones who are not so loveable. One does not, after all, become gracious by reading a good book on grace, but by acting graciously. Yea verily, I have met some liberals in my time who were as snarky and judgmental as the most insufferable fundamentalist. We're sinners too!

So, what does it mean to be a follower of Jesus? When people ask me how do you do that? What is Christianity 101? What's the first step? My answer surprises them. They expect me to give them a list of things to believe. But I say, start by doing this: the next time you are in the grocery store, say to the young black man who sacks you groceries, "*Thank you sir.*"

Or put in a garden, and tend it, and be reborn to the experience of eating something you planted and then picked with your own hands— something which is not processed—I can promise you this is very close to a religious experience.

Or raise your children to understand that violence in all its forms is the scourge of humanity, and that there is nothing, absolutely nothing glorious about war. War is sin.

Or practice the lost art of being humble in a world that tells you to think about nobody but yourself. Walk lightly through your day and don't think of yourself as any big deal (you'll be happier). My wife, bless her heart, has taken it as her mission to remind me, every single day, "*Robin, you're no big deal.*" And she should know!

Leave places, things, and people better than you found them. Don't litter, don't cheat on you taxes – even if you think you can get away with it, and remember that you are not self-made, however appealing that idea may be. Nobody is self-made! And if you want the benefit of doubt from people, then give them the benefit of the doubt.

And don't atheists who write best-selling books bother you. We need to have more honest conversations in church about what we mean when we say the word "God." Often, when I hear some famous atheist like Richard Dawkins explain why he doesn't believe in God by describing the God he doesn't believe in, I am tempted to say, I don't believe in the God that you don't believe in either!

What I ask my own congregation to think about, on a regular basis is the vital difference in religion between the irrational (believing something you know is not true) and the “trans-rational” (believing in more than can be known)—because this would help countless people come back to worship who don’t want to check their brains at the door. Christians need to remember the essential wisdom of the Tao: when you think you know, that is when you do not know; but when you know that you do not know, that is when you know.

This much my life has taught me: people need a beloved community now more than ever. We need sacred space where people can actually make promises to care about one another and then try to keep them. Because as amazing as our gadgets are, we live in a time of deep, electronically facilitated illusions of “social networking.” A life spent in front of a computer is a lonesome life. We need to stop hiding behind our emoticons and remember that the very term, “virtual relationship” is an oxymoron. The Beloved Community requires bodies in the presence of other bodies in order to be the Body of Christ.

And our preaching must be biblical responsible, intellectually honest, emotionally satisfying, and socially significant if the church is to survive. The truth is none of us get out of this life alive, all families are dysfunctional, and either all of us matter or none of us do.

Now don’t kid yourself, I can get as depressed and discouraged as they next person. Sometimes I just want to roll over and go back to sleep, or invite all my clever anarchist friends over for a big gripe session, pour everyone a big cup of despair and drink a toast to turning out the lights.

Except that then I remember why I’m still hopeful. I remember some remarkably hopeful things we all just lived through in America. The election of the first African-American, not once, but twice to be the 44th president of the United States – and his middle name is Hussein! (Oh, that Dr. King could have lived to see that day). The Supreme Court ruling that recently legalized gay marriage in all 50 states, (this is one way we’re ahead of you Australia! C’mon!) capping a change in attitudes about our GLBT sisters and brothers that was stunning in its swiftness. And although the media hardly gave this the attention it deserves, the Paris Climate Change summit brought together a remarkable coalition of nations who have pledged to at least no longer live in denial, and who have taken the first steps toward reducing carbon emissions.

Years ago, I heard a commercial for something called York Peppermint Patties (I think they still have these) and it was their tagline. I don’t know if any of you remember Peppermint Patties, but I came to realise that it is actually the credo of America— does anybody know it? You can’t be too rich or too thin. That’s my land. That’s where I live. The land of the free. The home of the brave. Actually that isn’t true of course. Howard Hughes proved you can be too rich. Karen Carpenter proved you can be too thin.

If that is unofficial credo of our image obsessed and materialistic society, then I ‘d like to suggest that a progressive church should have a very different credo. You can’t be too honest or too compassionate. To begin with, we’ve got to recover our sacred vocabulary, and not let the culture steal all our best words. Grace, sacrament, epiphany, these are our words, and we will not give them up with out a fight. We will say what we mean and mean what we say. So, for example, when we hear someone say – on the street corner: *“have you heard about so and so, the quarterback? He’s got a sore arm, he might not be able to start in the big game! It’s a “crisis”!* It’s a crisis because a quarterback might not be able to start in the big game? No, it’s not. It’s not a crisis! It’s a quarterback with a sore arm!

A crisis is a father with four kids and no job. A crisis is a mother, whose husband abandoned her, and who now shoots up in front of her kids to make it through the day. A crisis is a photograph of the arctic ice shelf, which is 40% smaller today than it was 30 years ago. That's a crisis.

So don't just wrap yourself up in dogma or believe in word magic? Someone else has said they believe in the literal virgin birth—that's fine, but does it change the shape of your day? Perhaps you are waiting for the second coming? You think that the Second coming is really, really important! Could that be because, deep down, you were really disappointed in the first one? Oh, you say you: I'm a died-in-the-wool Trinitarian? Good, fine. But, have you ever wondered if just three doesn't sell God a bit short?

Now more than ever, the world needs a church with an open table, because a closed communion table is the anti-gospel. The church should make it clear that everyone who is sick should be able to see a doctor and not go bankrupt. The church must lead the way in standing up against all those who would discriminate against, or mistreat our gay and lesbian sisters and brothers. They are not freaks of nature—they are our sisters and brothers, nieces and nephews, mothers and fathers, aunts and uncles. They are constituents of creation.

Not long ago we had a conference in Oklahoma – which is a very homophobic place - on homosexuality and the church (in Oklahoma, they call that HO MO sexuality and the church) and a pastor challenged me in front of the audience for leading a church that was too “gay friendly”. “*We know you love the gays, Robin, so read your Bible--God made Adam and Eve, God did not make Adam and Steve.*” I had heard this before, of course. You've probably heard it too. My suggestion is that the next time you hear it you should ask a follow up question. “*So who made Steve?*” (laughter) (It has a kind of delayed reaction ever time!”

To wrap this up, and to get your questions, I want to ask how many of you remember the old Joni Mitchell song, “Big Yellow Taxi.” Well, I'm here to tell you that it was more prophetic that we realized . . .

They paved paradise
And put up a parking lot
With a pink hotel, a boutique
And a swinging hot spot
Don't it always seem to go
That you don't know what you've got
Till it's gone
They paved paradise
And put up a parking lot
They took all the trees
Put em in a tree museum
And they charged the people
A dollar and a half just to see em
Don't it always seem to go

That you don't know what you've got
Till it's gone
They paved paradise
And put up a parking lot
Hey farmer farmer
Put away the DDT now
Give me spots on my apples
But leave me the birds and the bees
Please!
Don't it always seem to go
That you don't know what you've got
Till it's gone
They paved paradise
And put up a parking lot.

I'm afraid that in many ways in the church we have paved paradise and put up a parking lot. Divided the House of Jesus into a million pieces because we care more about being right than we care about being loving. And I think that the church of the future will have to make us once more into peculiar (even dangerous) people again. Dangerous because we refuse to be conformed to this world, but instead chose not just to "*transform it by the renewal of our minds*" but also by the work of hearts and our hands.

I am not much interested in the Super-human Jesus, because you and I are not faster than a speeding bullet, we are not more powerful than a locomotive, we are not able to leap tall buildings in a single bound. We are mere mortals and God is not going to save us without help from us.

To that end, we have the radical teachings and unconditional love of the man from Nazareth, the one the poet Mary Oliver called the man of "melancholy madness." I think the time has come, and now is, when the only thing that can save the church is for it go underground again, and for all of us to seem a little mad—a little crazy—because crazy is as crazy does, and Jesus was a subversive for the cause of love. I think that when we baptize people we should be saying: "Do you promise to be crazy like Jesus was crazy?" I'm gonna start that in my church.

You may be a little crazy for having invited me here, but aren't we all sick and tired of living life in the shallow end of the pool? So, let's push out, shall we, into some deeper water. For if not us, then who? If not here at Pitt St Church, then where? If not now, then when?

As it was written in The Talmud long ago: Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly now. Love mercy now. Walk humbly now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.

To close I'm gonna share with you the benediction we say every Sunday morning at my church back in Oklahoma City. I say, "*And now may the power of God, and the peace of our Lord Jesus Christ, which really does pass all our understanding, go with everyone of us, abiding, lifting us up, making us whole. Go in peace, pray for peace, wage a little peace and love one another—every single other*".

Those last three words, however, I do not speak alone. The whole congregation says "*every single other*" in unison. So those are the last three words that we hear in the sanctuary, ringing in our ears, and I'd like to ask you to join me in saying them also. When I say, "love one another" you response with, "Every single other." Ready?

"And now may the power of God, and the peace of our Lord Jesus, which really does pass all our understanding, go with everyone of us, abiding in us, lifting us up, and making us whole. Go in peace, pray for peace, wage a little peace, and love one another--***every single other***. It sounds so good. Amen.