Why Christian - Rev. Emily Swan, Sept. 17, 2017

Intro
Good morning! I'd like to say a special hello to the moms from Serendipidydodah.

This week we're finishing out our "Why Christian" sermon series, and next Sunday we will being a new series using Brené Brown's book, *Braving the Wilderness*. It just came out, and I know Ken is reading it while he's Up North this week so we can dive right in with preaching. The six-week series will also serve as our member renewal sermon series. We have a one-year renewable membership system at Blue Ocean.

Why?
A couple weeks ago when I preached I shared that having personal spiritual experiences of Jesus is the main reason I'm Christian. That—even when I've been mistreated by the larger church, or when I've felt let down by being handed a set of beliefs that I later came to regard as untrue— a sense of God's presence and guidance has felt as real to me as anything else I know.

I haven't often said this to people, and certainly this is the first time I've said it publicly, but when I changed vocations in my early 30s from business and started pastoring, I made a deliberate decision that—in order to do so with my full heart—I needed to feel okay about what I was doing with my life—*even if it turns out in the end that there is no God*. I never wanted to look back on my life and regret spending decades leading people toward something I felt like could be harmful … or even just useless … if it turned out God doesn't exist.

Now, I do believe there is a God. But I've been me long enough to know I would have periods of doubt. They *have* come, they *will* come, and [like Madeleine L'Engle wrote in *Walking On Water*] I embrace doubt as part and parcel of a healthy faith. Many of us here have gained enough hard-won wisdom to realize that claiming certainty about anything is a fool's errand … and embracing certainty about something as mysterious as God seems the height of arrogance.

So, even if there were no God, would I feel okay spending my life practicing in this spiritual tradition—going as deep as I can—and teaching others to do the same?

Clearly I decided that I could do that. So I want to briefly share why—what attracts me to faith aside from spiritual experiences—and then I've asked Brandon Carruth to share at length why he's Christian. Because you hear Ken and I talk a lot, and I think it's important to have some other voices in the mix.

The Banquet
Jesus sometimes talked about the kingdom of God being like a giant family dinner table. The image of God preparing a banquet table for humanity has ancient roots in the Hebrew Scriptures and the people Jesus taught were familiar with the metaphor. It's a theme that runs throughout our tradition (and the Jewish tradition).

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In the Old Testament, there was a prophet named Isaiah who had a vision for a grand party. A vision of people from all the nations of the earth gathering together on Mount Zion in Jerusalem for an extravagant banquet with amazing food and wine—the kind of food a king would serve honored guests.

Isaiah 25:6-9 - On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare
a feast of rich food for all peoples,
a banquet of aged wine—
the best of meats and the finest of wines.
On this mountain he will destroy
the shroud that enfolds all peoples,
the sheet that covers all nations;
he will swallow up death forever.
The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears
from all faces;
he will remove his people's disgrace
from all the earth.
The Lord has spoken.
In that day they will say,
"Surely this is our God;
we trusted in him, and he saved us.
This is the Lord, we trusted in him;
let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation."

All of the nations are invited to this feast. Everyone can come—the whole global family. No one is coming as a servant; no one is coming as a second class citizen. They are invited as honored guests. And at this banquet we're told sadness will melt away, shame will be wiped from our experience, and the goodness and joy and abundance and companionship of God and his people will cause all those who come to the feast to say, "Surely this is our God. This is the Lord." It's visionary, it's Romantic, it's a beautiful picture of connection between God and his people that Isaiah is sharing with us.

I'm attracted to a faith whose Big Idea is a giant family banquet table where everyone is welcome. Any meal where one group, be it women or POC or LGBTQ or any other *category* of people, receives less respect and dignity falls short of God's table.

My friend Jeff Chu once said: "The table I long for—the church I hope for—has each of you sitting around it, struggling to hold the knowledge that you, vulnerable you and courageous you, are beloved by God, not just welcome but desperately, fiercely wanted."

Creating this kind of table is not easy—that space Isaiah is talking about (we might call it the kingdom of God) is hard-fought and hard-won—it requires self-giving love. It requires learning to do the hard work of forgiveness and reconciliation. It requires we place others' needs above our own—that we serve one another.

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It asks that we learn to live with each others' differences … including differences of doctrinal opinion … it's what the Apostle Paul fleshed out in Romans 14-15 that Ken developed into the Third Way approach to community. Paul says that, on disputable matters within the church, we can agree to disagree with each other while erring on the side of inclusion.

As a gay woman I want my more conservative brothers and sisters at the table, but they have to agree to treat me with equal dignity to themselves. Otherwise I experience their judgment and our relationship isn't safe for me. And I have to agree not to think contemptuously of them, but honor them for their sincere conviction. This requires maturity and discipleship on both sides.

Oftentimes, people start demanding special table rules, asking that the scapegoat of the day be relegated to a side table—*you're a woman, you shouldn't preach … go sit over there while we talk amongst ourselves about what we think you can do.* When people start insisting on their own rules, Jesus beckons us to protect the vulnerable.

I'm attracted to this vision of creating a table where all are welcome, equally, with no faction creating special table rules when God him/herself has welcomed us all on equal terms. I think it's a beautiful dream for the world.

The Christian tradition equips us with a framework that's been passed down, honed, critiqued and self-critiqued through the millennia. It's a framework that helps us learn those skills that allow for the banquet feast. We learn to forgive one another and to stand up for the oppressed.

And Jesus is beautiful.

I think Jesus, in the way he lived his life embracing the outcasts and the way he exposed the scapegoating mechanism for what it is … which is a false way of maintaining peace at the table … I think Jesus is The Way we do this. I think we find the way to save the table from imploding (from having people turn on each other) through him … we find an grand idea of a way of saving the whole world from imploding … we literally find our salvation by following his path of laying down our lives for love and working for the sake of the beautiful banquet.

So even if, for whatever reason, this whole spiritual sha-bang turns out to be some human construct or evolutionary quirk, this Big Idea of the banquet table and the time-honored disciplines we employ to help us attain this vision, is valuable to me. It's worth living for, and even dying for. Christianity is an idealistic dream of a diverse community of people who make space for everyone. We learn to love one another because we were first loved by God. We most certainly don't do this perfectly, but it's worth investing in with all we are and all we have. The alternative is to grow cynical about humanity, and that's not the way I want to live my life. I choose to live with faith, hope, and love.