

Exploring Progressive Christianity
C.S. Lewis Quote
September 8, 2024
Rev. Kelley Becker

This sermon series came about as part of the work the Board is doing on a 5-year plan for DCC. As part of that plan, we will spell out the kind of community we are/strive to be. I've been familiar with the core values of Progressive Christianity for years. But I saw them in a new light as the work on the 5-year plan got rolling. When I talked with the Board about that, they suggested that it would make for a good sermon series, especially if we were considering incorporating parts of these values (or a version of them) into the plan.

As we explored these core values, we talked about the beauty of the diversity of thought and belief in our church. We have also seen that there is a whole lot of common ground in what we think and believe.

The final Progressive Christianity core value, once again, is:
[Progressive Christians]

Commit to a path of life-long **learning**, compassion, and selfless **love** on this **journey** toward a personally authentic and meaningful **faith**.

On the slide, I've highlighted the words in this core value that I was drawn to. I've always liked the metaphor of life as a journey and this core value uses that metaphor and suggests the destination of this journey is the formation of "an authentic and meaningful belief system (faith)." This is a very Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) thing to say. Our denomination, because of the diversity within it, encourages each one of us to decide what we believe. This is why creeds are not part of our tradition. We are all responsible for figuring out what we believe and why.

The idea that we do that by learning and loving rings true for me. In my own life, what I have learned and who and what I have loved continues to shape what I believe about the Holy and humanity. I wonder if that is true for you. What I'm getting at is that our beliefs should be formed by our lives and, in turn, our lives should be guided by our beliefs.

I wonder if you can think of something you have learned through experience that has helped shape your faith. Or is there someone you have loved who has shaped what you believe about God or humanity?
[In-house responses]

As we think about what we have learned just from living life, we can see how what we believe changes over time. Our experiences cause us to see scripture and other words of wisdom in a new light, understand new perspectives, and, hopefully, love bigger.

In the first sermon of this series, I mentioned that I was more interested in the core values of Progressive Christianity than I am in labeling myself or others as “Progressive Christians.” Unfortunately, the word progressive has been used so much in partisan politics that, when we use it to talk about spirituality it is sometimes a distraction. Even without politics, the Progressive Christian label is scary for some and has a negative connotation for others.

The word “progressive” finds its roots in the word “progress” and progress can be scary, especially when it comes to deep-rooted, embedded faith. For some, a faith that changes or progresses is not exciting or energizing, it is truly frightening. Many of us were taught what to believe as children and we were not taught that what we were taught is open to change. That isn’t very realistic though. How many of you believe the same things you believed 10 years ago? You aren’t supposed to! Life, this journey we are on together, is supposed to change us.

We’ve talked about finding wisdom in the Bible and other places. This week, our wisdom comes from perhaps an unlikely source, C.S. Lewis and his book *The Case for Christianity*. He wrote about progress in terms of a person’s spiritual journey, “We all want progress,” he writes. “But progress means getting nearer to the place where you want to be. And if you have taken a wrong turn then to go forward does not get you any nearer. If you are on the wrong road progress means doing an about-turn and walking back to the right road and in that case the man [person] who turns back soonest is the most progressive. There is nothing progressive about being pig-headed and refusing to admit a mistake. And I think if you look at the present state of the world it’s pretty plain that humanity has been making some big mistakes. We’re on the wrong road.”

If you’ve read anything by C.S. Lewis, you probably would guess that I don’t agree with everything he wrote, but I think his conclusion here, even 80+ years later, is solid. Collectively, we are on the wrong road. If our destination is about finding connection with the Sacred and other human beings, we cannot look at what is happening in the world today and not see that we are headed the wrong way. Here are just a few examples...

There are over 110 armed conflicts in the world today.¹ We are on the wrong road. There have been 45 school shootings in the United States so far this year. We are on the wrong road. On a single night in January 2023, there were 653,104 people in the U.S. experiencing homelessness. We are on the wrong road. The sea level rises 4.4 mm every year. 1.2 trillion tons of glacial ice melts every year. The world is 2.3 degrees Fahrenheit warmer than it was in the pre-industrial era, with most of the warming occurring since the 1970s. We are on the wrong road. I could go on, but you get the idea. Our children are anxious, our senior citizens are lonely and afraid, our teachers are exhausted, our families are fractured, our friendships are transactional,

¹ <https://geneva-academy.ch/galleries/today-s-armed-conflicts>, accessed 9/6/24.

and our churches care more about “right belief” than loving and caring for people. We are on the wrong road. Harkening back to Robert Frost’s poem, it seems like road of love and compassion has become the road less traveled.

And deep down in all our hearts, we know this is not the road we ought to be on. I am sure the sacred part of you that sees that sacred part of me and the sacred part of all living creatures knows that we were not created for violence and destruction. We were created for love. But a lot of us are so overwhelmed with trying to get through the day that the idea of changing the world seems out of reach. Some of us can barely change the roll of toilet paper. And some of y’all don’t put it back wrong when you do. Joking aside...I am here to say, I see you. I feel it too and I know that right now, so much seems unfixable.

So, what do we do? How do we, amid our busy, stressful lives, get the world on the right road again? How do we create a world in which progress isn’t having more of everything? Maybe we need more of just one thing...love for each other. What we believe about God and human beings must impact our journey, not just on Sunday mornings, but the rest of the week too. If we believe that ultimately God is Love, then we must be Love too. The world needs the people who say they follow the ways of Jesus to actually follow Jesus’ ways.

One of the jobs of the Church is to teach and show people what that looks like. This week, a friend shared a story on social media about a church in Michigan that had a carnival, and they gave away an AR15. When the minister was interviewed about it, he said, “Jesus believes in personal protection.” What? The person who was publicly arrested (without a fight), beaten, and killed by the Roman Empire “believes in personal protection?” Not only do we need to follow Jesus’ ways, but we need to not make stuff up. He made that up. This is not the Church showing people what following Jesus is like and what love is like.

Guys like that minister and ministers who spew hatefulness at city council meetings and who encourage their congregations to hate and judge instead of showing compassion and love are the reason I think it's so important for us to define what kind of community we want to be in our 5-year plan. It will give us a touchpoint moving forward... a place to go when we are making decisions about our shared ministry. When we start new programs, we already ask ourselves which DCC core value that program engages. Through the 5-year plan, we will begin asking the question, “Does this program or ministry or decision align with who we say we want to be?” Like does giving away an AK15 align with who we say we want to be? We cannot be all things to all people, but we can be who we say we are.

The more I have explored and reflected on Progressive Christianity’s core values, the more I see parallels between them and the ways we live out our DCC core values: Welcome, Grow, and Serve. On the bulletin insert and in a comment on the livestream,

you will see the Progressive Christianity core values (paraphrased). I've put in parenthesis the DCC core value that corresponds with each core value we have explored. To me, the values from Progressive Christianity put a little meat on the bones of our core values: Welcome, Grow, and Serve look like when we live them.

We:

- Find connection with other people and the Sacred through the ways of Jesus. (WELCOME)
- Believe that Jesus' teachings are one way of finding that connection, and other sources of wisdom are valuable and meaningful. (GROW)
- Seek inclusive community, theologically and otherwise. (WELCOME)
- Know that how we treat each other reflects what we believe about the Sacred and humanity. (SERVE)
- Value questions and are skeptical of absolutes and religious dogma. (GROW)
- Work for peace and justice. (SERVE)
- Protect and restore the Earth. (SERVE)
- Commit to learning and love on this journey toward an authentic and meaningful faith. (GROW)

This insert will be one of our points of discussion tomorrow evening at the sermon talk-back meeting. I've paraphrased the original Progressive Christianity core values because I wanted them to start with a verb, with action. I would love to wordsmith these with you tomorrow night and to listen to what you have to say.

In addition to defining the kind of community we want to be, the 5-year plan will include specific ministry and program goals and how we plan to achieve them. It will include specific building and grounds plans, both for use and improvement, and how we will go about making them real. The 5-year plan will guide us as we work to stay on the right road toward a more hopeful future. We will use it to call ourselves back when we start to wander, and we will use it to inspire us to love bigger. And the best part is we get to do it together.

As we walk into fall (which tends to be both busy and beautiful), I am grateful for and proud of who we are. We have so much to celebrate and so much to look forward to. I am also aware that this will be a tumultuous season leading to the November election. People will say things and do things that will make the hair on the back of your neck stand up. People will fly flags that make you uncomfortable and wear t-shirts and hats you don't like. They will talk about voters' issues and their ideas will seem to put money before people. They will define progress differently from you and from me. We may even disagree a bit among ourselves.

As your pastor, I am asking you to please remember that ultimately this journey is about loving. The DCC community exists to love. We don't have to love what a person says or does to love their humanity. We are also not required to spend time with

people who bring out the worst in us and who question our humanity and worth. Let us not forget, though that we are all on the journey of be-coming...becoming who we were meant to be. We are all searching and learning and making mistakes. The thing that brings me hope when I get overwhelmed is that I believe it is never too late to turn around and take a different road. That is true for me and for you and every person we will meet. It is time for all of us to take the road less traveled...the road of love. I can't wait to see who we are in the days, months, and years to come. Amen.