LEARNING HOW TO SEE with Brian McLaren

Season 4, Episode 6
Re-Consecrate Everything

feat. Barbara Brown Taylor

Brian: "There is no away." Environmental activist, Annie Leonard says, "When you throw something away, it goes somewhere." Once this simple insight hits you, you realize what a myth our culture has built itself upon. The movement of domination and exploitation that has told us, if we don't like something, we can simply kill it, banish it, incarcerate it, incinerate it, ignore it, bury it, or otherwise throw it away and it will be gone for good. But as James Baldwin realized, what is true of things in space is also true of time itself. He said, "History is not the past. It is the present. We carry our history with us. We are our history. If we pretend otherwise, we are literally criminals." We can't, in other words, simply erase the past and throw it away.

Similarly, Dr. King realized that we can't throw our enemies away. If we hate and kill our enemies, if we marginalize and ghettoize them, even if we attempt genocide against them, we will create thousands more. As their relatives, descendants and friends, not to mention our own descendants forever despise us for what we have done. "The only way to get rid of our enemies is to turn them into friends." As Dr. King said. He said, "Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend." We never get rid of an enemy by meeting hate with hate. We get rid of an enemy by getting rid of enmity. So at this critical moment, we have the chance to learn that nothing can be thrown away. That means that everything matters. Every blade of grass, every sparrow, every pebble, every drop of water counts and has value.

I see this reality whenever I walk along the beach near my home. The orange shell that the horse conch fashion remains after the conch dies. The snail itself becomes food and nutrients for other creatures. Soon a bright red hermit crab has recycled the abandoned shell as her home.

Before humans and their movement of domination, exploitation, and extraction, there was no trash. It didn't exist. Every leaf, every bone, every scrap of food was a gift to something else. That realization provides a sobering reminder to all who decide not to stay Christian. You can leave Christianity, but Christianity won't leave you. No matter how toxic some of its elements, they will still be there in the environment living on like plastic trash in the minds and hearts and bodies of your neighbors. And through them, Christianity will still influence you. So Christianity must be recycled whether you stay part of it or not. Another word for recycled is redeemed, built on the word deem, which means to give value. Another word for redeemed is reconsecrated to make holy again what has been desecrated.

Welcome everyone.` Again. I'm so happy to be in conversation with someone I respect greatly and have been helped by in so many ways through her talks and writings and friendship. And that's Dr. Barbara Brown Taylor. This chapter and episode is about reconsecrating everything. Something that seems to me to become more and more important for those of us who are trying to figure out how to stay Christian or maybe not stay Christian, but become more human in the process.

I begin the chapter with a quote from Annie Leonard who is speaking in the realm of ecology when she said, there is no away, meaning we can't throw anything away. And I would love to hear just any immediate thoughts you have on those words from Annie Leonard, Barbara.

Barbara: At the literal level all of us should have to take our garbage to the dump so we can see what happens in away, which is where all of our stuff goes. I go there at the literal level, and then my mind leaps also to a woman I met in New Zealand one time, and she was listening to some of my then progressive ideas. And she said to me, so sweetly afterwards, she said, "How do we learn to walk without despising the cradle?" It was like a zen kōan because there are ways in which when one walks or wants to walk differently or walk somewhere else, burn the cradle.

And I think she was talking in a different way about how there's no away. That the cradle lives in me, the cradle's why I can do what I do. And so not only can I not throw anything away, but I don't think it behooves me particularly. I also can't save all my stuff. So I'm going to run this metaphor into the ground if I'm not careful. But I certainly agree that especially where our Christian faith theology practices are concerned, things will not go away. They will either be stockpiled somewhere where they'll stink, or other people will pick them up and handle them and use them. So it makes a lot of sense to me to stay in the web with all that has gone before.

Brian: Boy, when we're talking about it on the very literal level, as you know, I live where Hurricane Ian came as an unexpected visitor a while back, and I was just taking a drive over the weekend and street after street after street mile after mile after mile, people whose homes were flooded, now they have to take out the couch that got soaked with really slimy kind of gross seawater, and they've got to haul out the refrigerator that was filled with food. And when there was no electricity, all that food rotted and the refrigerator just stinks and isn't usable because it was flooded. And all the carpeting and then the drywall that starts to get mildew on it and the volume just, I can't imagine the volume and where it can all be taken, but at the same time, you can also see why you can't just leave it where it is.

And so this struggle to have to get rid of stuff or say, this doesn't serve anymore or this is dangerous to keep around. We feel it in the physical life. But I think this is one of the reasons many people do want to leave their religion because they feel there are toxic mildewy, stinky elements. They can't be around it any longer. So they just think, let's be done. Let's be done with the whole thing. Just get rid of it.

I say a little later in the chapter, you can leave Christianity, but Christianity won't leave you, in the sense that it's still out there in the environment. And I guess this is part of what I'm trying to grapple with in this chapter and that I think all of us who have religious ambivalence find ourselves struggling with, how do we deal with these elements that we no longer want to support and promote and uphold, but that other people find very valuable and precious and sacred even?

Barbara: Well, I, like you, know people who deal with it by unleashing almost inexhaustible fury on the things that they now experience as toxic and punishing those who still hold on to them and doing their best to wreck it for them. So that won't work with harmony. I mean, if we're aspiring in any way to a stage of faith that includes harmony, not only with where we're going but where we've been, then that's not an option.

I love though your permission to recycle and redeem what we can because I think too often people have never considered that was possible for them, that they needed someone else's

permission to do that. And as Anglican and obedient as I am, I'm real Protestant on that count, which is I think it's enormously important that each of us engage in our own reconsecration projects without seeking permission from the gatekeepers who may be protecting their own livelihood. So I'll bless anything you put in front of me.

Brian: I'd love to hear more about that, Barbara, because I would imagine part of your life as an Episcopal priest has been learning to make certain things special, sacred, learning to help other people acknowledge and feel them as sacred. I suppose in some ways someone might say, well, if you make everything sacred, then that's the same as having nothing sacred. I'd love to hear your thoughts on that.

Barbara: Yeah. Well, first, we'll cite Genesis. God didn't look around and said, well, some of it's good, but a whole lot of it's not good. I mean, there was a kind of blanket pronouncement of goodness there. So I'll always go back to the original blessing. But you know what you just put in my mind? I was remembering back much earlier in my formal parish ministry. Episcopalians have a blessing of homes, and it was amazing how helpful that came in when the blessing of men who loved men and women who loved women, we had no right for that. We had nothing to say to them.

So we do house blessings and we would really linger in the bathroom and the bedroom and the kitchen and bless all that happened in the living room and the dining room. And that was such a wonderful way to use a sacramental tradition. And in some perhaps sneaky, but I think not so sneaky ways, to bless something the church wasn't blessing at that time. I do love being a sacramental kind of Christian and seeing the ways in which both subversively and straightforwardly sacramental formulae are sometimes flexible in wonderful and unexpected ways.

Brian: That's such a perfect example too, of taking something that is part of a tradition and giving it a whole new life and a whole new meaning. Oh, that's just a beautiful example. I wonder through the years, has there been a Christian doctrine or practice that really bugged you or that just didn't sit right with you, or that seemed to be doing some harm that you found a way to, as our mutual friend, Diana Butler Bass says re-tradition, in other words, put new meaning around it and behind it.

Barbara: Perhaps we'll have time to talk about things. I'm still struggling with on that count. I am more aware of how liberating things I learned in churches for humanity for everyday life to perhaps bring those together whom they were meant to keep apart. But I probably, since I'm headed into heretic territory, I went and saw a heretics' T-shirt and it had almost everybody I like on it. So maybe I'll be on the T-shirt one day. But I'm still trying to repurpose substitutionary atonement. I'm still trying to repurpose a single parent, father God. And I'm still trying to repurpose, this is going to sound really strange, but omnipotence because I've run into so many people who've quit faith because God made this happen or God let that happen. And it seems to me the Christian story is one, especially on the cross of a God who doesn't intervene, but who suffers with. And so omnipotence is the one that's bizarrely at the top of my list right now. Can I ask you the same thing? Can I ask you about... Which example in the book would you pull out?

Brian: Actually, let's take that omnipotence one because I think you're absolutely right. As you probably know it, but many of our folks who are listening to this conversation may not know, over the last 80 to a hundred years, there has been a really serious and deep theological reconsideration of that idea of omnipotence. And one of the places where it's been happening is in the world of process theology where people have said, what if the relationship between God, whatever God is, what if the relationship between God and the universe is not one of control? It takes away that idea, that power, that the Almighty is a great stand-in for the name God. And feminist theologians, as you know over the last generation or two have said, yeah, if we think as women about the power of giving life, that power is not about control, that power is about generosity and vulnerability and connection.

And so all of these and in many other ways this conversation has opened up. What kind of trouble are we sneaking into our hearts hidden under the word omnipotence? And a word like that, no doubt solves problems and comforts people in some ways, but it really harms and breaks people in other ways. So I think that's a great example for us to talk about. And when you mention the whole idea of substitutionary atonement, it brings to mind Catholic philosopher Jack Caputo who has written a lot about elements of post-modern philosophy. And one of the words that he's picked up is the word deconstruction. And Jack says, deconstruction is not destruction. Deconstruction is love. It's loving something enough to tell the story behind it. And I remember I grew up being taught that atonement theology, the idea that God needs to punish Jesus in order to forgive us, that that was what the gospel was really was.

And I remember when I started to see problems with it. And then more and more people started to tell me their problems with it. And I remember thinking, why don't I learn this story? Where did this idea come from? And when I found out that the idea had never even been in Christian history for its first thousand years, oh, things started to look different. And I think that's one of the things that maybe we do with doctrines is we realize that there's a story behind them, weren't always there. They came from somewhere. And very often they came to solve the problem of the previous doctrine, which I think is the case when we talk about atonement theology, I think that's maybe one of the ways we don't throw it away, but we in a sense, put it in its place or we take some of its excessive power away just by telling its story. Does that make sense?

Barbara: Oh, I love that idea. I do very much love that idea because there is a story behind it. You also remind me that so often when I come up against a prohibition, it's because something went really foul earlier on. There's a rule that makes no sense to me, but I've come to trust there's a story there too. So that works in daily life as well as theological life.

Brian: In a previous episode, we were talking about how hard it is when we meet people who live within different labels and we have different agendas and we are opponents to one another on political issues and how do we see their humanity? And I think this same principle of saying there's a story behind why they hold that view. There's a story behind why they're so passionate about that, and it doesn't solve the problem, but it changes it somehow, doesn't it, to try to understand the story.

Barbara: Yeah, absolutely. That's one of my new spiritual practices. When I find my temperature going up and I'm getting heated in a discussion to just say, tell me why that's so important to you. And then the narrative begins to unfold. And if I can accept my own invitation and talk about why the issue, its never issues it's people, but if I can talk about why the issue matters so much to me, then we've, with any luck gone one floor lower down where our feet are on the ground a little better.

Brian: Someday, I bet some psychologists will figure out how to map this on the brain. But when you move from argument and hostility, and this is not a great technical psychological term, but freak out mode into curiosity, tell me why that's so important to you? That move must just light up the brain in a very different way because it sure feels different, doesn't it? It's a whole different energy.

This idea of recycling, as I was reflecting on this theme that things can't simply be thrown away. We have to find some new use for them. It brought to mind that beautiful famous poetry from Isaiah, the vision of beating swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. It's this way of saying, look, we've got a huge arsenal of swords and spears. What could they be repurposed for? How could they be fashioned into something more helpful? And it seems to me this is for people like you who spent many years as a parish priest, people like me, I was a pastor for many years. This is a big part of what we end up doing, isn't it? Trying to find ways to make things meaningful and beautiful and healthy and helpful.

Barbara: You just popped my mind into how that's done through art and theater and music as well as through semantics, our discussions. While you were talking, I saw a cross at the National Cathedral at what used to be the College of Preachers, and it was the prodigal daughter. There was a young woman kneeling at the feet of the cross. And I just think about that in so many ways where the recycling doesn't happen on the left side of my brain, it happens on the right through art and concept and space. Anyhow, an interesting thought I'd like to pursue sometime. So thank you.

Brian: Yeah. I mean even the idea of Isaiah through poetry giving us a different imagination. What could we do with all these swords that we have lying around? If we would like to envision a less violent world, what could we do with all these pruning hooks? It reminds me of our friend Shane Claiborne's, work with many others of taking guns and turn them into garden tools. I suppose it's going to be different for each person, but when people think about what it is in a religious community that has hurt them, then to think, is there a way that could be defanged or detoxified or maybe even redeemed and recycled? I think this is going to be really, really important work.

Something else I tried to do in this chapter is take the terms secular and sacred or secular and religious and try to help us see that it's not that one is sacred and needed, and the other is evil and to be shunned, but that both are really, really important and that sacred and secular are both sacred. I'd love to hear any reflections you have on that.

Barbara: As I was reading, I was grateful actually that you used religious and secular because sacred and secular has bothered me a lot in my life. The ways in which water can be made holy in church, but not in a kitchen or a bathroom. And bread is sacred on an altar, but not around a dinner table. I mean, all the ways in which the sacred uses of things and the secular uses

of things have been pitted against each other. So I actually liked your use of religious and secular. I wish I knew the derivation of secular. Do you right this minute? I'm not going to put you on the spot, but to me it has always sounded like antiseptic. Maybe because I'm a religiously educated person, it has always sounded like a not good word. Secular was always like a antiseptic, empty, null set. Like N-O-N-E-S, nuns secular was like nones.

Brian: Yes, yes.

Barbara: We don't need a duality there do we? If we're trying to leave the stage of duality, we don't need a new one there. Nor do we need a kind of pharisaical thank God. I am not like that stage one person. That's not going to help anything.

Brian: Yes, exactly. So I think that word secular just comes from the word for world. So it's something that's worldly as opposed to churchly or of this world rather than of eternity and so on. Which is another dualism that, as you know, I have all kinds of at very best mixed feelings and actually problems with.

And then that other related word profane has an interesting etymology pro, meaning in front of phantom meaning temple. So something's profane if it's something you do in front of the temple, but not inside the temple. Oh my goodness. And then it calls to mind an old sermon. I probably heard this sermon four or five times from that moment in the Good Friday story, when the veil of the temple is torn from top to bottom. I've heard one sermon that says, God is letting everyone into the holy of holies. The veil is ripped so people can come in. I've heard another sermon that says the veil is ripped so that God can get out. Let me out of here. I want to be in the world.

And that seems to me to be part of what writers like you and me and many others and poets try to do, isn't it? They try to help us just see how precious the wind blowing in the upper branches of a tree could be, or that little sparrow pecking at breadcrumbs under a table at an outdoor restaurant or whatever it is to help us see, oh, this is precious, this is sacred. This has that goodness that all creation partakes in.

Barbara: Yeah, and again, as you talk, I think that one of the fun things about preaching, and I think it could be just as fun in a Bible study, is that biblical stories I think yield themselves to recycling and redemption and rehearing, just depending on where you stand in a story. And it doesn't have to be a parable or a fictional story. It can be things that really happen. Where are you in the crowd that's hearing blessed are the poor and whoa to the rich? Where are you in the crowd? How much money do you have in the bank? I mean, I do think biblical narrative with all of its problems and all of its history of trouble making and human smashing has got a real narrative possibility. So I do love that part of the tradition.

Brian: One of my favorite biblical scholars, I've had the privilege to meet in my life as a feminist biblical scholar named Joanne Baddeley. And Joanne said, "How do we assess what is a good interpretation of a text as opposed to a less worthy or less credible or less weighty interpretation?" And one of her answers to that question is, which interpretation takes into account the most details of the text? Which is an interesting thought. If those details are there, they're there for a reason. And so a good interpretation would take into account those details. And I remember that little permission slip that she gave me helped me one advent

season when I was preaching about the virgin birth. Which is one of those subjects that a whole lot of people find unhelpful in large part because they feel it plays into all kinds of stereotypes about sex and we could also talk about the scientific dimensions of it.

But I remember because of her insight, I thought I was reading that text, getting ready to preach one advent season, and I thought, what if this isn't about God bypassing sex? What if this is about God bypassing men? In other words, the story here is that men are running the world and causing all kinds of trouble, and they're doing it because men love to have swords and spears, and that's how they show that kind of omnipotent power we were talking about. And women work with a different kind of power. And I just remember that insight. Suddenly I thought, oh, that would be a way of talking about the virgin birth, that whether you take it literally or not suddenly recycles it and offers a different angle on it.

Barbara: While staying completely true to the story. That's where I get envious of Jews who've got a tradition of Midrash, sacred storytelling that doesn't ever contradict text, I don't think, but feels free to fill in missing detail. Or suppose what if you stood over there, and I, Brian, have never heard that sermon on the virgin birth, but I'm going to preach it next chance I get.

Brian: Okay, well maybe that's a good place to draw our conversation to a close. It's funny you mentioned envy for our Jewish brothers and sisters. I was on a long bus ride with a rabbi and on that bus ride we became friends and are still very deep friends today. On that first bus ride, she said, "Brian, something I don't get about you Christians, what is it that you want to find? The one meaning of a text?" And she said "To us, the text is sacred because it's a bottomless well of meaning, and for you to try to say it's only one little bottle of meaning and there's no more to get from it." She said, "That feels like it desecrates the text." And I just think to myself, yes. So maybe when we see a bad interpretation, a bad meaning or a meaning that's been used to harm and that seems very reductive and we're given permission by our Jewish friends to say, hey, there, there's more meaning that we can find in that text and give ourselves permission to do so.

Barbara: Amen.

Brian: I'd like to leave you with this reflection from Do I Stay Christian? It's not that religion is holy and the secular is profane. It's that both religion and the secular can be holy and both can be desecrated. Recalling again, Wendell Berry's wise words, ultimately, the religious and the secular are not two things, but one life. Our work is to stop the desecration of life in both its religious and secular dimensions. Our work is to restore both the religious and the secular to a creative dynamism that deserves and inspires appropriate reverence. Because business can be truly holy work. In fact, some of the most important spiritual breakthroughs in the world today are happening through people in the world of business. Politics and governance can be holy work. In fact, some of the greatest saints and prophets today are brave activists and political leaders.

Entertainment and education can be holy work. In fact, artists, entertainers, teachers and scholars are filling the spiritual void left by religious leaders who have painted themselves into any number of theological corners. Science and tech can be holy work. In fact, a surprising number of researchers and inventors are driven by curiosity and love, so powerful that they invite the adjective divine. Yes, even religion can be holy work, though so often it

has disappointed us.

Every dimension and vocation of life can be holy, even though they often are not. Those of us who stay Christian must start this truly urgent, but also unrushable work in our own household. What we don't redeem, what we don't acknowledge and learn from will haunt us until we do. As we proceed in this process, we can join with our counterparts in other traditions, including secular traditions and institutions, to become collaborators in a civilization wide spring cleaning, preparing our species for the new beginning we all need if we are to survive on this beautiful, fragile planet. If we don't learn to reconsecrate everything as holy and spiritual, we will desecrate everything, turning it into trash or burying it in trash. There is no a way for anybody, Christian or not everything can be holy, religious or not.

If this episode has raised questions for you, we'll devote a final episode in this season to responding to listener questions. You'll find information in the show notes and how to leave a recorded or written question, and I'd look forward to responding.

Thanks to the Center for Action and Contemplation for all of your support for this podcast. Thanks especially to our wonderful producer, Corey Wayne, and all of his artistry and support. And a special thanks to each of you for listening, for your attention, for your care, for your interest in learning how to see. And if you found this series helpful, I hope you'll share it with someone you know and love.