

**LEARNING  
HOW  
TO**



**SEE**

with

**Brian  
McLaren**

Season 4, Episode 11  
Listener Questions:

Community

Brian: Welcome back everyone to a special bonus episode of season four of “Learning How to See.” I’d like to begin with a prayer that I include in the book, “Do I Stay Christian?” It’s from page 210, and it just feels like this prayer is really appropriate for this spirit behind so many of the questions that came in through this season. Let me read it as a prayer for us right now.

“I do not know everything. I do not even know how much I do not know, nor do I know how much of what I know is impartial, faulty or false, so I pray. Source of all truth, help me to hunger for truth even if it upsets, modifies or overturns what I already think is true. Guide me into all the truth I can bear, and stretch me to bear even more, so that I may always choose the whole truth even with disruption, over half-truths with self-deception. Grant me passion to follow wisdom wherever it leads.”

Well, in that spirit, seeking for truth that stretches us beyond what we may already think, first, let me welcome my colleagues, Dawson Allen, Michael Petro and Gigi Ross, for an engagement with some of the amazing, beautiful, powerful and touching questions that came in from season four. Dawson, will you start us with a question for today?

Dawson: Yeah, absolutely.

“I’m not sure if this is the right place to email my question for your final episode, but trust that if it’s meant to be, it’ll find the right landing spot. I’m a 62-year-old cradle Catholic who has been questioning Catholicism for several years, and have distanced myself as a practicing Catholic over the past two to three years. My husband and I both received all our sacraments in the Catholic Church, including our marriage, and raised our now three adult children in the Catholic tradition. I was very active in our church as a Eucharistic minister, lector and Cantor, along with religious education teacher and various committees over the years. The local church that we were a member of is also the church that I was raised in, so not only in faith practice, but also our extended religious and social connections for most of my life. Catholicism has been my religious tribe all my life.

Over the past years, while my personal faith with the divine has grown deeper and deeper, I started questioning the patriarchy, the hypocrisy of sexual scandals, and the fence building that I see in Catholicism. Some people are in, some people are out, which really came to a head when our grandson announced that he was gay. I could not, in all good conscious, support a religious community that would not support my grandson. I had to choose to stay and be silent, stay and raise hell, or leave. I left.”

Brian, there’s so much to unpack there, but it strikes me that this is exactly why you set out on writing this book, “Do I Stay Christian?” I’d love to hear any initial reflections on the first part of this question.

Brian: Yeah, I’m sure each of us felt how honest and moving it is, and it’s just a reminder. A lot of people think, “It’s only young people having problems with the church. It’s only evangelicals going through “deconstruction.” Here’s a 62-year-old cradle Catholic going through these struggles over many years, but intensifying in her sixties. I’m really struck by this love. “I love my church, it’s been such a big part of my life, but I love my grandson, and I can’t pretend to support a community that won’t support my grandson,” just the integrity and struggle of this. Here’s an irony. I wonder sometimes if the way the church works, whether it means to

or not, it does us our greatest favor when it brings us to the point where we have to disagree with it, where we have to say, “You have raised me to be a member of a community in conversation about God, in deep thinking about God, and I have reached a point where I think differently than my community about God.”

The church might see that as a failure in the person, but it may be a success, that this is an essential part of each of our own spiritual growth. I know this is true for me. I grew up, and by the time I was eight or nine years old, I was having theological struggles with things my church taught, and that just continued through the years. Just the other day I was talking with Jim Finley, and he was remembering that powerful story of St. John of the cross, who wanted to reform his order, and members of his order threw him in just a disgusting pit of a jail cell, and took him out every day to beat him up, and then throw him back in the cell. Of course, the darkness of that cell became the dark night out of which his deeper engagements with God came. I think there is something about that, that a lot of us experience. Does that resonate with any of you?

Gigi: Yeah, it reminds me that, in many traditional societies, there’s a place where, in order to become an adult, you come to this place where you have to question. You get to question just the way you learned about how your community and reality interface spiritually. That’s built into the society. In the Western society we don’t do those kinds of rites of passage. We, I think in some ways, are stuck in that place where, what happens when we question something, we just get to decide what to keep and what not to keep, and we get to make it our own, instead of just being what we were always spoonfed as a child. It’s a really adult move to question and then come to grapple, integrate with what makes sense for you. Unfortunately, there are very few churches, church communities that allow that to happen. This questioner and many others are in that place where they are seeking to become adult believers, and don’t have a place in their church community that will allow them to do that. I hear that in this question.

Brian: As you say that, Gigi, I think of a young man, 31 years old or so, who stands up in his religious community and says, “You have heard it said, but I say to you.” In a sense, Jesus in that way is saying, “I have permission to challenge assumptions shared by my community.” Of course, that’s part of the struggle, isn’t it? The religion ostensibly representing Jesus often doesn’t allow that kind of spiritual adulthood that you were just talking about. Thank God it sometimes does, and my hope and prayer is that, in the years ahead, because of people like the folks sending in these questions, this will change. There will be more of these kinds of communities that welcome people into spiritual adulthood. Right now, we live in that tension.

Dawson, maybe you could continue reading this question from this listener.

Dawson: Sure. “I was also truly seeking a faith tradition that was transformational rather than transactional, one that changed people’s lives. What I was experiencing was people including me who showed up and did what they did out of a routine and habit, not a bad church or bad people, just not a good fit anymore. I feel like I’ve evolved in my spirituality, my relationship with the divine, and that the Catholic Church does not support my faith in terms of where it’s at now. I don’t feel ill will towards it, and if it works for others, that’s fine. It just doesn’t work for me anymore. At the same time, I do miss some things, the comfort

of the familiar, the belonging to a tribe, and most of all, any sort of a spiritual community. I do not know where I'm going, I just know that back there is not it."

Brian, this might be another good place to stop, just to share any thoughts you might have on grief, changing beliefs and community.

Brian: Well, first of all, I want to say that this dear person is Roman Catholic, but we could hear identical stories from Southern Baptists or Episcopalians. We could hear the same heart's cry from many people. That's the first thing I want to say. The second thing I want to say is, I'm very fortunate in this, because I get around, and I travel, and I write, and people contact me. I hear a lot of stories like this, but I also know there are a lot of communities where this person would be welcome, and what they're looking for, never perfectly, but what this person is looking for really exists in a church, including in a Catholic Church.

When I was a Protestant, the most open spiritual community I ever encountered was a Catholic community. Very often it has less to do with the label, and more to do with just the accident of where we live, and whether there is such a community that has room for us, and room for us to grow, whether that's nearby. I also sense part of what you just read to us, this is about grief, a grief that a lot of us share. I think it's worth just pausing and taking that grief seriously. There are communities that nurtured us, that meant the world to us, that taught us so much of what we know, and made us so much of who we are, and now, we don't feel we fit in those communities. Does that resonate with the three of you in any way?

Mike: Yeah, I would say it hits hard for me. First of all, I just loved everything that's been said up to this point, and really appreciated what Gigi said about a mature community, where you can ask questions and challenge things. My rubric with some of this has been... there's a line in a song that I love that says, "When you find yourself the villain in the story you've written, it's time to leave." There've been spiritual communities where I've had to ask myself, "There's things I can't agree with. If I'm not part of the solution, I'm part of the problem. I have to go." You justify the choice.

There was for me, initially, almost a shame when I would leave a community, to go, "I disagree with everything. I disagree with major things about that, but I still am so sad to have lost these people and this support. While I might protest how they exclude other people, I'm embarrassed to admit that I miss being included." To be very honest, when I haven't taken the time to grieve those losses, I've carried them into my attempts to find a new community, and it's been not great for me. I just want to honor that grief, and I'd be curious, for the three of you, if you've found ways that are helpful to grieve the loss of community, or the loss of certainty, or the loss of inclusion?

Brian: Mike, let me say one thing that helped me in that grief. First of all, I think the grief, as you say, it's real, it's natural and it's good. We have to grieve that something precious feels it's being taken from us, we're losing it. I didn't want to become bitter, that was my problem. I was very tempted to be so angry at these people. "I'm growing, why aren't you growing at the same pace and in the same direction I am?"

Why aren't you as mature as I am," which has all kinds of irony in it. A thought came to me when I was in the middle of struggling with this. I felt it was the voice of the spirit in some way, and here it was. It was just the sense, let people off the hook. Let people off the hook meant the hook that they have put in themselves.

Here's the hook: the idea that people of our religion or denomination or congregation are better than normal people. What I needed to do is say, "These are normal people. These are human beings, and so am I." Part of what, in a sense, the grief was forcing me to face was that, in the end, we're all fragile human beings, and we're all filled with biases and problems and fears and hangups and cowardice and reactivity, and all the beautiful things that go along with being human. What I found is, when Christians of my background said, "We're better than everybody else. We're biblical, we're spirit filled," I would hold them to that standard, and be super angry and disappointed at them for acting like normal people. I don't know if that makes sense, but that's one of the ways that I was able to cope with the grief without getting too bitter.

Mike: That's super helpful, Brian. I appreciate that. I hadn't considered that, that grief prevents sadness from becoming even more powerful anger. That was really good.

Brian: Dawson, why don't you bring us the rest of this letter?

Dawson: "My question for you is, how do I find a new spiritual community? I really have no interest in changing to another or organized Christian religion, which I feel have the same issues, just with a different box. I do, however, still believe very much in the Jesus story, and his example for us in our lives, which I guess makes me Christian. We live in a very rural area. The only religious communities in the area are Catholic and Protestant churches. I've considered online communities, but I'm truly seeking an in-person community. I've come to the conclusion I may have to try and start my own small community, but I don't know where to begin. Our friends and family in the area are still very much rooted in their local church. I continue to pray to God that he will guide and direct me. He knows that I feel as if I'm wandering in the wilderness, which I am, but I'm also certain that I'm not alone in my experience. I can't be the only one who feels this way. Advice?"

Brian: Oh my. I'd love to hear your reactions to this.

Gigi: I had a different experience. I never felt accepted by my home, the church I grew up in. I was always searching for a community most of my life. For me, the threat was, where did I feel like home? I felt like home in contemplative practices, and so I looked for places where there were groups who were practicing. I was living in DC, and there, the communities that were most involved in contemplative practices and contemplative spirituality was the Episcopal church. I found myself going to the Taize service. Like a previous questioner, I loved it because there was no sermon. It was just singing and silence, and prayers. Eventually, I got into centering prayer, and there were two churches equal distance from where I was living, two parishes where you had centering prayer groups.

I tried them both, and one, it felt more warm to me. I just started going to the

centering prayer group, which was a Wednesday night. Eventually, I decided to try the church service, and I eventually became an Episcopalian. At the same time that was happening, I also started working at a contemplative Christian organization. There, I also felt fully accepted as myself, and so that also became a community for me. I would add that what was important for me was the acceptance and sense of belonging, and not 100% agreement with everything, or that people were perfect, because there were problems in all of those. There were things that I would've done differently. It was a place where I could allow that love for that community to actually come through, and flourish.

Even when there were these difficulties, and eventually, one of the communities, I had to leave for various reasons, the love was still there. My grief came after that. For me, by that time, I had people who weren't involved in that community but who were good listeners, who I could just come to and talk to, and just process what I was going through. I find for me that being in the place where I'm open, I just stay open, and allow God to show me, and allow God to bring things to me. That's just my way. There are other people who have more energy, and innovation, and creativity, they start communities. That's just not me. For me, it's just being open, and allowing what shows up, and just taking advantage of what shows up, and just letting that lead me to another place. That's how it works for me.

Brian: That's an important story to tell, because some people feel they're leaving a place, and there will never be a place that will be right for them. You have a story where you found some places that really were good landing pads for you, or good new homes for you spiritually. Dawson, how about you?

Dawson: I'll start by just candidly saying that I don't have an answer to this question. I don't have a resolution, or a personal story that I can say, "Hey, I found this one particular community, and it's cohesively meeting all my hopes and desires for spirituality and religion in our current moment." What I will say is, I really appreciated the arc that this question took in this, I think it was Walter Brueggemann who used the term "Prophetic imagination." It sounds like this conclusion that's coming here is trying to imagine a new kind of community. Just to scale that out a little bit, I think that's what our moment is calling for in a lot of ways. There's a ton of different ways to say it. I think Albert Einstein said, "The same thinking that created the problem can't then solve that problem," or Audra Lorde, who says, "The master's tools can't tear down the master's home."

I think both of those invite a new way of thinking, and I really do believe that we're in a moment where, in different capacities, and shapes, and forms, we're really being invited to thinking through, what are the kinds of communities that would serve our needs, and be the kind of place that we would want to be, that we would want future generations to inherit? What are the institutions? What are the structures and cultures? What are the leaders in this moment that we would like to follow? I think there's a really great invitation there. I'm sorry I don't have a more definitive answer, but that's where I'm at.

Brian: That's beautiful. Mike, anything you want to add there?

Mike: I think what I love is, I feel as if I'm wandering in the wilderness, which I am, and I'm also certain that I'm not alone in my experience. Those are powerful words, and they're archetypal. Wandering in the wilderness is an image that we have that goes back to the

very beginning of our spiritual traditions. I'll say for me, having lost brick and mortar faith communities, I carried that loss for a long time. It's defined my life in a lot of ways. I have 15 years of dreams that I have, where I'm driving around a town, looking for the place that I'm supposed to stay, and I never find it. Or, I'm wandering around a giant mansion, looking for the room that I'm staying in, and I never get there. I'm never upset in the dreams, it's the weirdest thing, and they've evolved over the course of a decade and a half to now, this very pleasant, watching people pass through, and waving, and going, "I'll stay here, and I'll move on."

What I've come to realize is that I find myself at home in this listener's question. When she says, or he says, they say, "I feel as if I'm wandering in the wilderness, which I am," I feel a stirring in my heart, and I hear another person who's a part of the tribe of wandering exiles, and I say, "Here we all are." I haven't found another brick and mortar community that meets in a building on a Sunday, but I've found this found family of other people from other faiths, from other traditions, from other religions, who've all had this experience, and continue the journey.

We come in and out of each other's lives, and we support each other, and for my money, the alternative orthodoxy that we talk about here at the center are also so many different mystics and contemplatives and activists who are a part of this tribe of wandering exiles. I feel that when I talk to the three of you. It makes me feel at home in my not at homeness, which I also know is a very enneagram four thing to say. Sorry, that's my rambling response to it. To this person I would say, "Hello, fellow traveler. Stay with the journey."

Brian:

That's great. I have a feeling that's one of the things that podcasts are doing for people spread out in so many different places. They listen to a podcast, and they think, "I'm part of this conversation. This makes sense to me. I'm so glad I can eavesdrop on this, because this is the conversation I need to be part of." I often think that what Martin Luther's 95 Theses that he ostensibly nailed to the door of the Wittenberg Church, that work is happening in podcasts all over the place now. The CAC does this too, through events, and the Living School, in many ways. I think we'd all agree, a lot of people have been attracted to the Living School because they're looking for a community of people where they're allowed to ask their questions, and they're allowed to think differently, and they're allowed to do the things that we need to do, as Gigi said, to become adults, to become mature.

I'm really also struck, we've talked about this sense of grief, and it's a reminder to us how important a tribe or an extended family, or as you said Mike, a chosen family, how important that kind of belonging really is. There's a huge amount of psychological empirical data that tells us that belonging somewhere is super important. Between COVID and social media, we have so many people who are isolated. They might be able to find an online community that they can join, but that feeling of being physically isolated, "I haven't been hugged in months. I haven't sat and had a meal with somebody in a long time. I haven't been invited to somebody's home." It's a reminder to us of our embodiment, and that hunger and that thirst for that kind of companionship, I think, is a really good thing. One of the things this question, and really, this whole season of episodes of this podcast I think have helped us see is that, if you think of it this way, tribes only survive by trust. How do I know I can trust you?

The way that a lot of our religious tribes have formed is by saying, “I can trust you if you agree with all of these beliefs, or if you agree with this hierarchy, or if you agree with these rituals, and see them as we do. We can trust you based on agreement.” That creates genuine, deep belonging for a lot of people, but when the agreement starts to wear thin, we end up in trouble. The four of us having this conversation in the United States right now, where so many of our churches, just in the last six years or so, have been overtly or covertly won over to White Christian nationalism, we just have to say it. There are an awful lot of people who are realizing, “The church I was part of, I no longer can support. Maybe because I’ve changed, maybe because they’re changing too,” and figuring out what to do. Sometimes, they can find another place.

I think that may be a good place for us to stop, is with this. What this listener said is, “I have the feeling I’m supposed to start something.” I don’t think she’s saying, “I’m going to start the new, Reformed and reorganized Roman Catholic Church.” I think what she’s saying is, “I’ve got to find some people, and build a little tribe of fellow seekers.” Let me just mention a handful of resources that could be helpful for people. I’ve received messages like this all the time and have for the last 20 plus years. I wrote a book some years ago called “We Make the Road by Walking,” and I wrote that book with 52 chapters. Each chapter can be read aloud in 10 to 12 minutes, and there’s a lectionary, or set of Bible readings that goes along with each chapter.

If you can see what I was doing there, I was creating a way that a group of people could get together for a year, and have a year’s worth of short meditations to then give them something to talk about with each other. Those meditations aren’t asking for agreement. In fact, one of the questions that goes along with each one of them is, “What about this bothered you?” “What about this do you disagree with?” Disagreement is a welcome part. Honest disagreement is one of the ground rules of the community. That could be of use to people. The Center for Action and Contemplation in the Living School have developed circle groups, and a set of guidelines that can help circle groups get together, and give them some ground rules, so that they can have a sufficient amount of trust by saying, “We’ll follow these ground rules to create safe spaces that aren’t dependent on doctrinal agreement.”

The ancient Quakers had a simple way of meeting. They would sit in silence until someone felt they had something to say. That’s pretty easy to do. They would also have queries. These queries were picked up by the Methodists, in what was called the Methodist class meeting. A query might be, “How goes it with Your Soul?” You could get a group of three or five or 12 people together, and just say, “Hey, let’s just get together every week and talk about, how goes it with your soul?” Another question might be, “Where have you experienced the divine? Where have you experienced God, or the spirit, or something transcendent in the way someone treated you, in the way you treated someone else, in some experience you had in nature, in quietness?” It’s a beautiful, simple question. You can get a group of people together and ask questions like that.

I think some of you know my close friend Gareth Higgins, who started a journal called “The Porch,” and they’re establishing porch circles, and the idea of, it’s so easy to get together and rock on a rocking chair on somebody’s porch. Well, it should be that easy for us to come together, and be community to one another. They have a set of resources, if people want to look that up online.



There are a number of ways for that to happen, and maybe in closing, I could just say, maybe now those words of Jesus make sense in a new way. There was a religious institution of the temple, and there were religious congregations called synagogues, and he says to his disciples, “Wherever two or three of you gather in my name,” which by the way, I don’t think he meant in the name of the Christian religion. I think what he meant was, “In my name means to carry on my work, to play the part of me. Wherever you get together to keep this thing that I’m starting going, I’ll be there in the midst of you, and it only takes two or three.”

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. A special thanks to each of you for listening, for your attention, for your care, for your interest in learning how to see. If you found this series helpful, I hope you’ll share it with someone you know and love.