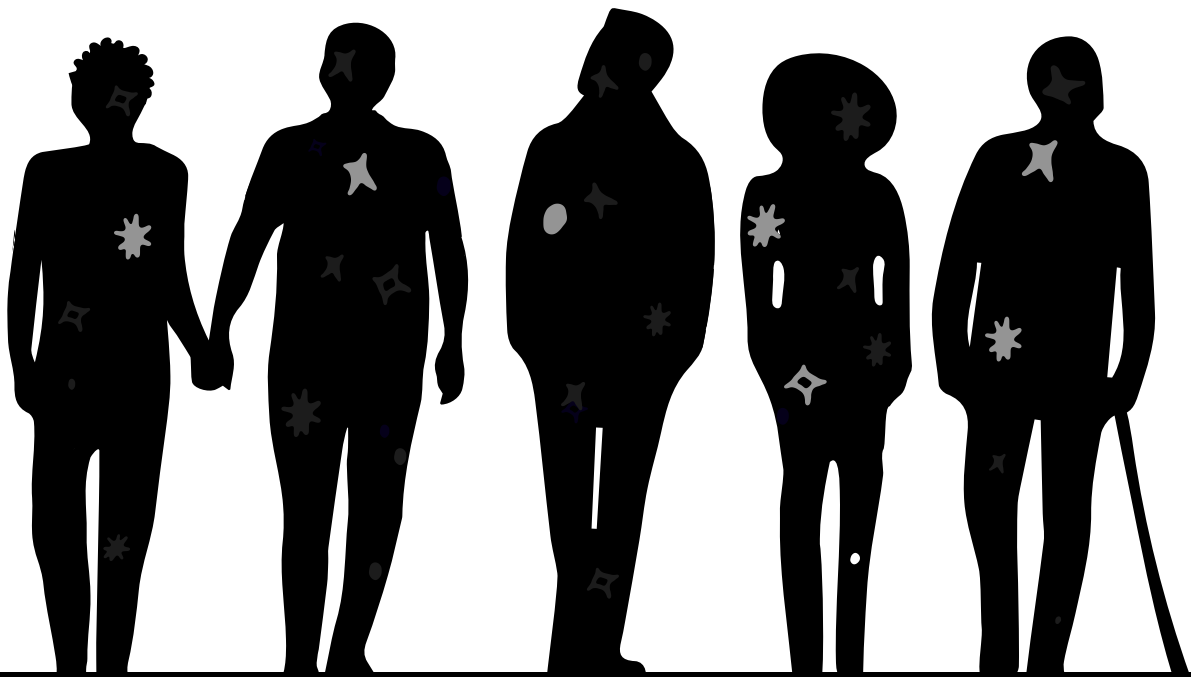


THE COSMIC WE

Episode 6:
Living Ourselves Into New Ways of Being

with Brian D. McLaren



from the CENTER FOR ACTION AND CONTEMPLATION

Brian McLaren: I think when we start desiring to see and we become aware of our own limitations, we start saying, how do other people see? I need to listen to them not to argue with them, that I see it correctly and they see it incorrectly, but to say, no, they may see something I don't. We all know the old parable of the elephant, when the blind man felt the elephant. A friend of mine wrote a book called *The Elephant is Running*, which is a way of saying not only do we all have different perspectives, but the reality that we're trying to touch is moving. And so the challenge of having the desire and humility to just try to live with open eyes, I think that's a huge part of what Spirituality's supposed to be about, what church is supposed to be about.

And really it's why we do podcasts, I think, is because we want to help people see the cosmic we, to see a larger we in which we are all contained and loved and beloved and interconnected. And lots of people have never seen that for one millisecond of their lives yet. And we hope that can change.

Donny Bryant: This podcast has explores the mystery of relatedness as an organizing principle of the universe and of our lives.

Barbara Holmes: We're trying to catch a glimpse of connections beyond color, continent, country, or kinship. And we're going to do this through science, mysticism, spirituality, and the creative arts.

Donny Bryant: I'm Donny Bryant.

Barbara Holmes: I'm Barbara Holmes, and this is *A Cosmic We*.

Today we're talking with Brian McLaren. Brian is one of my colleagues and the faculty of the CAC. He's also an author, college professor, speaker, activist and public theologian. He's a retired pastor and a passionate advocate for a new kind of Christianity, one that's just generous and working with people of all faiths for the common good. He says that the old way of being Christian is simply not working anymore. Brian is an Auburn Senior Fellow, a leader with the Convergence Network and a respected spiritual teacher. He's written many books and I encourage you to treat yourself to one or more. The problem is that they're also fascinating in title and content that it's going to be difficult to choose which one. He's offered more than 15 books, including, *The Last Word and The Word After That*, *The Secret Message of Jesus*, *Discovering The Truth That Could Change Everything*, *The Search For What Is Real*, *Everything Must Change*. And most recently, *Do I Stay Christian*, *A Guide For The Doubters*, *The Disappointed and The Disillusioned*. Welcome, Brian. You've met Dr. Donny Bryant, our co-host. We are so excited to have you here today.

Brian McLaren: Well, and I just want to say I'm a huge fan of the podcast and I'm so happy to be with both of you. So this is a treat for me.

Barbara Holmes: I want to lead off by just asking about the titles of your books. There's a provocative, what inspires you?

Brian McLaren: I don't know. There've been a lot of arguments with my publishers about some of the titles. My first book was called *The Church On The Other Side* and the publisher

rejected that title and they wanted a title that I won't even mention, and the book was released with that title, but they also misspelled my name in the book.

Barbara Holmes: Oh goodness.

Brian McLaren: So when they decided to fix that, they gave me the consolation prize of giving it my original title. So That's how these things go sometimes.

Donny Bryant: Dr. McLaren, I love the contradictions in your titles. There seems to be a theme. I mean, The Church On The Other Side, Faith After Doubt, Do I Stay Christian? Is there some inspiration from where that comes from? Help us understand that.

Brian McLaren: So I don't know, especially with my earlier titles, they were all kind of impulsive and intuitive. But some years ago a publisher told me something that has stayed with me. He said, people are reading more than they've ever read. They just read it for free online rather than paying for it in a book. And he said, if people are going to pay to read a book, they need you to make a promise that will help them with some problem or pain that they have. And so that has sort of guided me in some of my titles. At any rate, I try to name a pain and then make some sort of promise. So the pain is doubt, the promise is faith after doubt. And do I stay Christian? I suppose the problem is how do I handle Christian identity that seems to not make sense? And keeping it an open question, I suppose, is a bit of a promise. So that's been a part of the framework for me.

But one of the books that had the biggest effect on me, Donny, as I wrote it, was called Everything Must Change. And my original title for that got nixed by the publisher. It was Jesus and the Suicide Machine. And they felt that was a little too negative and a little too harsh and maybe would hurt a lot of people obviously who've been touched by that very real experience. So yeah, always a interesting struggle and challenge. By the way, speaking of names, just the name The Cosmic We, to me, I just love this. I love the name of this podcast because it is so much of what we're trying to figure out is how we fit in the bigger and bigger and biggest pictures.

Donny Bryant: Yeah.

Barbara Holmes: Yes. So what brought you to the question, do I stay Christian? Was it your experience as a pastor? What was it?

Brian McLaren: So I grew up in really a fundamentalist Christian setting. My parents were loving wonderful people. But the setting of Christianity that I was given, I was pretty sure by the time I was a teenager that as soon as I was 18 I would be done with it for good. I ended up having a very powerful spiritual experience in my teenage years that kept me on the path, but maybe on somewhat different terms. And in a sense, conflicted Christian identity has been a big part of this story of my life for a lot of reasons I'm sure we can talk about. And in my years as a pastor, people often said either you are our last stop on our way out of Christianity and we'll see how long we last here, or we were the first stop on their way in. And so I feel I've always lived at that sort of edge between people who feel that the Christian community is a beautiful home for them and people who feel they're not sure they're wanted or they're not sure they fit.

Barbara Holmes: You say that you had a powerful spiritual experience that really impacted you. Are you able to share some of that?

Brian McLaren: Sure. I was invited by some friends to go on a retreat with their Baptist church. And our church didn't have retreats. I mean, we were super biblical and retreats were never in the Bible, so I think they actually were Jesus getting away with the disciples, but we didn't have retreats. So my Baptist friends invited me on a retreat and it was during the years of charismatic renewal and I didn't know what that was. And frankly, the reason I went is because a couple of pretty girls were going and my friends invited me and I thought we'd have a lot of fun. I didn't know it at the time and they didn't use this word, but we were invited into a contemplative experience. They gave us an hour where they just said, we'd like you to go out and find a quiet place in nature and just to be alone and to just be in the presence of God in silence.

And I'd never heard about anything like that before. And I went out and I decided to climb up in a tree and I was sitting in the branch of a tree. I didn't know that the branch of the tree I was on was ant superhighway, so I had ants crawling all over me. So yeah, it wasn't a very warm and fuzzy experience, but I think I uttered some very honest prayers in that hour. And later that evening, a couple friends of mine and I snuck out of our cabin as teenagers are prone to do, and we went and sat on a hillside. We weren't doing anything nefarious, but as we sat there on the hillside, I felt the presence of a love that was so powerful, I literally was afraid. I mean, I felt like I would explode. It felt too big for me to contain.

And it was this sense that I was loved, that the stars above me were loved, that the grass on the hillside was loved, that the cow across the fence was loved, that the fence itself was... That everything was beloved and precious and unspeakably wonderful and valuable. And I had sort of separated myself from my friends, I was laughing, I was crying, I was just overwhelmed. And I came back and they had gotten into a very deep conversation while I was sort of at a distance away. When I came and sat back with them, I heard one of my friends say to the other, "I really love you". And it was maybe the first time I'd heard those words spoken not of parents to children or children to parents, but of friends. And I just remember thinking, whatever is going on here, this is what it's about. Yeah. So that was an unforgettable night for me.

Donny Bryant: In, Do I stay Christian, you tackle a question that many people today are wrestling with, Dr. McLaren, and not only people but also pastors. Particularly, there's an individual in one of your chapters, I believe it was chapter 19, Liam, you talk about Liam, and I think if I'm not, and I don't know the exact quote, but Liam said on most days he says he's an atheist. On most days he's an atheist.

And as I begin to process that chapter, I really loved how you revealed this juxtaposition of how Christianity is today and how Christianity could be or should be. And you even stated in the book that you know what, most days

I might be an atheist too, I'm an atheist to that slave holders God or I'm an atheist to maybe the name it and claim it God or my own quotes, I'm an atheist two, the kind of God that only cares about some people and not all people. And I just thought that was a fascinating maybe even summary of the book. And for our listeners, could you even just help the listeners understand the motivation behind the question, do I stay Christian, and help us understand how you process that? I mean, it was a fascinating book. I truly recommend this book to so many of my colleagues and so many of my friends. But coming from the author, could you give us kind of your inspiration to how you process that question?

Brian McLaren:

One of the things that happened to me over the last 10 years or so is I've had a surprising, surprising number of pastors come to me and say, "I want to get out of the pastorate and I don't want to be a Christian anymore". The pain is real and the issues are deep. And so that was an added motivation to write this book. And as I wrote the book, I decided to structure it, the first third of the book, just under the simple title, No, Do I Stay Christian? No. And I try to give 10 of the strongest reasons not to stay Christian that I'm aware of. And there are reasons, there are real reasons. In the next third of the book, it's called, Yes. And I basically grapple with the question, can we have our eyes wide open to those first 10 chapters and those 10 issues and can we with our eyes wide open still find a good reason to call ourself Christian?

So that's what those next 10 chapters try to do. And then at the end of that section I realized some people are going to stay Christian and some aren't. Whenever as a pastor, you both know this, if someone comes to you who's a victim of abuse, the first thing you do is you get them out of the abusive home. And there's a whole lot of people who've experienced horrible forms of abuse in their Christian community. And if they want to get away, the last thing I want to do is say, "No, you have to stay". I want to say, "If you need some space, get the space you need". It's an act of faith in the love of God for you that you don't keep subjecting yourself to the abuse of this religious community, just as you would say to an abusive spouse or abusive parent or whatever.

But what I realized is that whether a person chooses to stay Christian or not, the next morning they have to wake up and answer the question, how am I going to live? And for the kinds of people who would take their religious identity seriously enough to care about reading a book, Do I Stay Christian, I wanted to talk about how we're going to live however we answer the question. There's a sentence I don't think I put in the book that I wish I had, and here's the sentence. I wish I would've said something like this, that I think anyone who says yes to staying Christian should also say no to some elements of staying Christian. And anyone who says no should also say yes. In other words, no and the yes don't exclude one another, they each depend on the other.

Barbara Holmes:

What would you advise a young person entering ministry these days?

Brian McLaren:

Well, I think so many young people entering ministry are entering ministry

that is almost exclusively to people as old as their grandparents. And so I would say maybe two things to people. First I would say you should understand that the people who are paying your bills, many of them will be the age of your grandparents. So you should be aware of that and figure out how you're going to make that work. But then I would say to them, what are you going to do for your generation and your children's generation? And what helps the people who are paying the bills will probably not help those people of younger generations. Let me just give an example that really ties back, Donny, to your comment about the story about Liam in the book. And Liam basically said, I really love Jesus. I'm just not so sure about God.

What's happening for an awful lot of younger people is that the word God carries with it so much problematic baggage that they feel it's dishonest or even dangerous and immoral to keep using the term. So for example, if when they think of God, they're aware that the image in their mind and in the minds of most of the other people is an old white man with a long beard who sits on a throne. They feel they're upholding patriarchy and white supremacy and all kinds of things that they don't want to uphold when they say that or they think that they're upholding a supreme being who controls everything and makes everything happen. And they think if that's the definition of God, that just makes no sense to me. So to me, the thing that's very exciting in this time is that we're at a really, one of the most fertile periods in fresh thinking about what we mean when we say the word God that's happened in a long, long time.

A lot of those old assumptions are being questioned and I frankly think this is what Jesus was all about. I think among the many things that Jesus was out to do, he was out to radically change the way people or the way his peers thought about God. And he was interested in doing that by telling stories which are works of art, really short fiction. He was interested in this through what we might call public demonstrations and acts of sacred spectacle. And he was about doing this just in the way he treated people. And I feel like we in the Christian faith haven't really caught up to what he was trying to do in these first 2000 years.

Barbara Holmes: Your discussion about God and what God encompasses in the ways in which we construct God, not how God is, in the chapter title Free God, you say, "We can uncage God from some of our expectations. We can even free God from the word God itself". Say more.

Brian McLaren: When I was a pastor, I had a wonderful blessing in my life. We had a large number of people start attending our church who are from the recovery community. And so these are people who had very little, if no formal religious background, but they had become addicted to alcohol or heroin or some substance and gotten in recovery where they learned about a higher power. And I began attending meetings even though I'd never had a chemical addiction, I would start attending meetings with some of the members of my congregation because I felt I was learning what church really should be. And when I was there, one of the things that I realized that Alcoholics Anonymous did, and a lot of people don't know this, largely, this was through the influence of a brilliant Episcopal priest named Samuel Shoemaker, but they basically said, you don't need to use the word God to talk about God. They developed the term higher power.

And they said, look, you are understanding of God, all of our understandings of God aren't the point. The point is trusting something beyond ourselves. And I just remember feeling that this was a gift to give to people, to not have to carry so much dogma that whenever you say the word God, because an awful lot of us have that dogma, if you use the word God, it means you're anti LGBTQ. If you use the word God, it means you don't believe in climate change or you believe the end of the world's around the corner or you believe more people's poverty is their own fault. I mean all kinds of stuff that just make no sense, but for so many people it's part of the suitcase you pick up when you pick up the word God.

So that's the kind of thing that I think we need to do. And if I could just add one other dimension to this, when you go back, and for those of us who are so deeply steeped in the Bible as I was, you realize that there's a whole lot of different images and metaphors used for God in the Bible. So God is called a shepherd, a good shepherd. Well, here's something interesting. People didn't start domesticating sheep until less than 10,000 BC. So before that, was God a shepherd? The term only makes sense in terms of a certain agricultural lifestyle.

And then you start to realize every metaphor we use for God has a historical context. For example, God is king, God is fathered, all of these very deeply embedded terms. Well, here's the thing that hits me. Does this mean that we always have to use metaphors for God that come from at least 4,000 or 8,000 years ago? Or are we allowed to look in our present moment and try to find metaphors for God that are as meaningful to us as shepherd or king was to someone in 800 BC. That to me, when you ask that question, it opens up enormous possibilities.

Donny Bryant:

It kind of brings you back to even what Liam was comfortable with. "I'm comfortable with Jesus." And it's in that incarnation where you begin to experience the connectivity, the union between not only the divine, the creator, but also the union with each other. You begin to understand that and not only the reality of the incarnation, but even in the lifestyle and the teachings and the gospel even in and of itself, the gospel of Jesus Christ. It helps us to be able to see, I believe as Father Richard Rohr once said, the Christ in everything, the Christ in creation, and what it means to be truly Christian is to be able to see the Christ, if you will, in everything.

Brian McLaren:

Donny, as you say that, I just think what an amazing thing that when people encountered this fellow, Jesus, the encounter affected them so deeply that they couldn't think about God in the same way anymore. There was a Quaker theologian named Elton Trueblood, and I've never found this in his books, but one of his students told me that he said this in a seminary class. He said, the Christian doctrine about the person of Christ, the deity of Christ, he says, it's not that we had this definition of God and Jesus came along and we elevated him to that definition. It's that we had all of these definitions of God and Jesus came along and we modified all of our definitions of God in light of our experience of this human being who was so motivated by love and justice and a deep abundant vitality.

I think there's so much going on there, and I feel that as I get older, I feel, it's so embarrassing to say this, I probably shouldn't say it, but I was a pastor for all

those years talking about God and I'm a writer, I write about God, I'm really not that interested in what people say about God. I'm really interested in what people demonstrate of God in the way they live.

Barbara Holmes: As you were talking, I was thinking about the fact that yes, we can free God from our tiny little narratives and from our cultural history, but can we handle the mystery of what or who God really is? Human beings can't abide anything they can't understand or control or put into words or paint or dance. They can't stand it. And so what do you do when the reality is that God is beyond our words?

Brian McLaren: Dr. B, I think that's why a lot of people appreciate so much Father Richard Rohr, who you just had on the podcast recently and who we get the privilege of working closely with and they are drawn to the Center For Action Contemplation. It's because finally they're in the presence of some people who say that an essential element of theology is humility and unknowing. And that the tendency to try to nail things down with that kind of certainty that you're talking about is actually the opposite of faith. And it's a dysfunction. It's not spirituality, it's spiritual dysfunction.

And I think if we just had more teachers that would teach people this, it would be easier for people to believe it. But I think so many of the teachers talk about God as if they've got God all figured out. They know what God wants, they know what God's against, they know who God would vote for. They know what political party God would be a member of. And oh my gosh, it just feels so demeaning. I mean, it really feels like everything that in the Hebrew scriptures they were against when they were against idolatry, reducing God to a little, well, I think it was the early church theologian, Gregory of Nyssa who said, "Concepts create idols. Only wonder understands". And that sense of the encounter with unknowing and wonder and awe, that's when our jaw drops, we say, wow, that might be our greatest theological utterance of our lives.

Barbara Holmes: It might just be. I admit, I am really not sure how to be a Christian in our current times. I know how you do it if Jesus is walking around in sandals and we're following around trying to understand what he's saying, I got that part. And I know what it means if you're in the midst of crisis in Ukraine or your responsibility to your neighbor. But in our current times, in our culture right now in America, how can I be a Christian, live it out, be real about it? I'm not sure anymore.

Brian McLaren: It really feels harder, doesn't it? Because the word means exactly opposite things. It means diametrically oppose things to different people. And so when you use the word, you realize that it could be communicating exactly what you want or exactly what you don't mean. And I suppose this is where at the end of the day, we live our lives and our lives count a lot more than the words that we say. In fact, as you know later in the book, I just say, look, I don't really care what people call me. I know who I want to be. I know who I feel called to be. I know who I desire to become and that's what I want to pursue, whatever anybody calls me. So it's interesting, in the New Testament there's a little passage where the apostle Paul says, "By the grace of God, I am what I am". In other words, this is what I am and I think God's okay with it, whether you are or not.

Donny Bryant: Going back to Barbara's question, how do we remain Christian in today's time, in this particular place, in this particular moment, there's a phrase that you use, reconsecrate everything. It's actually one of your chapters in the book. Could you help us to explore this concept of reconsecration, reconsecrating everything in light of this question of how do we exist in this time?

Brian McLaren: Well, this is where when we talk about how hard it is to identify as a Christian in the United States in this historical moment, and of course when you look at our history, it even is worse when you think about our history of racism and genocide and all the rest and how the Christian faith has really been the chaplain pronouncing forgiveness on the oppressors and imposing compliance on the oppressed. You feel the agony of it. But here's the problem, if I acknowledge that, I say to be a Christian is to have a conflicted identity in this country, and then I say, to be an American is to have a conflicted identity, to be a male is to have a conflicted identity, be a female, to be... And then you start realizing every one of our human identities is morally compromised and is conflicted. And I don't know, this might not help other people, but it sort of helps me to realize that all of our identities have these moral complexities to them.

And then what that does is instead of making me look at an identity to make me good, I'm an American, I'm good, I'm a Christian, I'm good, I'm a conservative or a liberal, I'm good, it makes me say, all of these identities are going to be what people like us make of them. So what do we want to make of them by the way that we live?

And so there's a sense that I think in the Christian faith, part of what those of us who stay Christian are going to try to do is we're going to try to be examples of that word meaning something substantial and something we know will fail at that ideal, but that it's an ideal that we are committed to. And the irony of that is that's what I want my Muslim friends to do with Islam, and that's what I want my Hindu friends to do with Hinduism. And it's what I want my atheist friends to do with atheism. I want them to try to be the most humane, loving form of whatever they are that they can be. And that's what I want to be myself as a Christian. And that to me is the reconsecration. It's in a certain sense, it's moving things in the direction of love and justice and peace and wholeness.

Barbara Holmes: There seems to be a bit of a conflict between what we believe and attest to about Christianity and what the outcomes actually are. If Christianity is a powerful option for transformation and rehumanizing, then why are so few people changed? I mean the ones who sit in the pew under the word and the scripture week after week, why is there so little change in their lives, in their outlook and in their hope?

Brian McLaren: Dr. B, you're making me think of a mentor and friend who passed away some years ago named Dallas Willard. I'm not sure if you ever heard of him, but he was a Christian writer and a very sweet person. And Dallas would have these little quips that he would utter with a complete deadpan that just would be devastating. And one of them was he would say, "Your system is perfectly designed to yield the results you are now getting". And I suppose what I'd have to say is that when we say Christian today, and it's slightly different if we're Pentecostal or Roman Catholic and which kind of

Roman Catholic we are, are we a Vatican II Catholic or anti Vatican II Catholic, but whatever group that we have, I think what we'd say is that the system is designed to produce a certain kind of result. And if we want a different result, then we're going to have to pay attention to the design.

And one of the things that has happened to me, I mean, when I shared this kind of spiritual experience that really set me on a different course as a teenager, for me, whatever Christianity was supposed to be, it was supposed to be about love. So it raises the question, what would a system look like that was designed to help people become the most loving version of themselves that they can be today and tomorrow and the next day? To me, this is our invitation to sort of reimagine the systems that we've inherited to produce a different result.

Barbara Holmes: Oh, you're looking for trouble, Brian if you want change in the church. You can't even move the pulpit a few inches to the left or the right. So how do we get change?

Brian McLaren: Yes. As you know, one of the chapters in the book that, actually, it's one of my favorite things I've written in the sense that I feel like, finally, I got this into words, it's a chapter on what I call Stuck Theology. It's so interesting when you say, isn't it ironic that when we talk about change in the church, it feels like an oxymoron. But what was Jesus all about? A new covenant, a new commandment, everything was about newness. Everything was about being born again, a new identity. Everything was about change. And it just shows how masterfully we have marginalized the Jesus that's there kind of in black and white on the pages and created a system that's about something else. And as you've talked about in this podcast so eloquently, I mean there's a huge part of Christianity that has been a slave holder religion.

And people maybe never consciously realize it, but the system existed to help some people oppress others and feel okay about it, feel it was God's will, feel it was forgiven or permission was granted or it was even the right thing to do. And we're doing the same thing with the earth. This idea that that human beings were made to dominate the earth and to exploit it as opposed to be caretakers and to cherish it as a precious expression of God. Yeah, it's just very, very different things can be produced by the same set of texts. The moral responsibility we have is, how are we going to interpret those texts and try to systematize them and live them out.

Donny Bryant: Dr. McLaren, one of the tools that I think could be very helpful for people as we are beginning this journey or continuing this journey of new creation is your podcast learning to see and so much of what we're talking about and so much of what we've been discussing even about your most recent work, Do I Stay Christian, is really embodying or rediscovering, I probably should use that term, rediscovering a way of seeing, a way of existing, a way of being. It's not so much something new, it's not some new knowledge, some new revelation. It's really a teshuvah, a return to the original state of goodness. And so could you give us kind of the highlights and some of the things from Learning To See you provide so many different conversations and so many great, wonderful strategies and tactics and tools from the seasons of that podcast. But what are some of the things that you could share with us that could help us and those who are new to some of the things we were discussing of how to see the way we were

created to see?

Brian McLaren: The first thing that comes to mind is that I have to acknowledge that a lot of times I don't want to see what's really there. I want to see what other people want to be there or I want to see what I wish were there but isn't. Richard Rohr often says that contemplation is learning to see all the reality I can handle and the sense that cultivating the desire to actually see what's there. In the first season of Learning How To See, I introduced the idea of biases, which are things that keep us from seeing what's really there. And once you become aware that there are, and these things are psychologically validated, there are all kinds of empirical research on just as all of us have experienced an optical illusion where we physically don't see, we see different things depending on what expectations we bring, this applies to what we notice and what seems real and who seems believable and so on.

So I wanted to start there so that we would be able to say it's not as easy to see what's really there as we thought. We have a lot of inborn biases and we have to consciously have a desire to overcome those biases. In the most recent season, I took the subject of Christianity and said, how do we see Christianity? And one of the things I wanted to do in that season is I invited a Jewish friend and I invited a Sikh friend. And so I invited people from outside the Christian faith to help us. How does our faith look to people on the outside? Because it looks one way to those of us on the inside. And that's another one of the, I think when we start desiring to see and we become aware of our own limitations, we start saying, how do other people see?

I need to listen to them not to argue with them that I see it correctly and they see it incorrectly, but to say, no, they may see something. We all know the famous old parable of the elephant when the blind man felt the elephant. A friend of mine wrote a book called, The Elephant is Running, which is a way of saying not only do we all have different perspectives, but the reality that we're trying to touch is moving. And so the challenge of having the desire and humility to just try to live with open eyes, I think that's a huge part of what spirituality's supposed to be about what church is supposed to be about. And really it's why we do podcasts I think, is because we want to help people see the cosmic we, to see a larger we in which we are all contained and loved and beloved and interconnected. And lots of people have never seen that for one millisecond of their lives yet. And we hope that can change.

Barbara Holmes: You have children and I have two boys, and the question while raising them was how do I get them to love Christianity in the way that I was raised to love Christianity when the culture is luring them in all kinds of ways and other things? We may have lost an entire generation of young people, but how do young parents of young children begin the process of teaching in the home about this Christianity that we say is important?

Brian McLaren: Yes, that is the most common question I've been asked over the last 10 years or so in my travels and speaking. Wherever I go, I can count on somebody asking that question. And it is because so many people say, I don't want to teach my children about God and religion and spirituality the same way I was taught it. It's done me so much damage, I don't want to do it. But I don't want to teach them nothing either.

I feel like that's a question that deserves many seasons of many podcasts on its own because so many of us are wrestling with it. But one thing I would say is if this idea of incarnation is really at the core of Christian faith, in other words, it's not just what you say or the creed you assent to, it's what you embody in your life.

I think what that invites parents to do is to very honestly and sincerely ask themselves, what do I want to embody in my life and what do I want my children to be able to pick up through my example? In other words, if we start with our embodiment and example, then when we put words to it, I think the words will make sense. If we start with the words, I don't think that will work. My wife Grace and I had four children in six years, so I wish I could say I did this every week, but I didn't. My wife did it a lot more than I did. But once I said to my wife, you can have some time at home, I'll take all four kids and I'll go grocery shopping. So this meant pulling two grocery carts through the shopping center and with one kid in one and one kid in another and two kids climbing in and out, and it was just a zoo.

We filled up two carts full of food, loaded into the car and we're driving home, and I see this elderly woman standing in the middle of the parking lot, like far away from any cars, an empty part of the parking lot, with her hand on her head just turning around in circles and she just had the look that she was lost. And I turned to my kids and probably the youngest one was maybe two, so the oldest was eight. So a few of them were old enough that I might have thought they'd remember it, but none of them do. And I turned around to them and I said, "Hey kids, we are Christians and that means that we love our neighbor. And see that lady over there, she looks like she's in trouble. She looks like she's lost, so we're going to go try to help her".

And I remember I looked in the rear view mirror and my kids' eyes are really big like, we're on a mission from God. And we went and found this lady and she had dementia and she couldn't remember. She came on a bus and couldn't remember how to get on the bus to go home. And it took a while, but we eventually got her back home and I walked her up to the door and came back to the car. And I just remembered that moment. I had this deep feeling, I think I just taught my kids what I'm supposed to teach them. And I do think I did, although they have no memory of it. But the thing I can say is I can see in their lives that that's the way that they're trying to live too. So that's a good thing.

Barbara Holmes: Yeah, some of the things that we learn from example and from the story you told are deeply sedimented in our lives. And we may not be able to recall it, but it's there.

Brian McLaren: Yeah, I hope so.

Barbara Holmes: How could you forget something like that? Yeah, it's there.

Donny Bryant: On the flip side though, I had a conversation recently with a colleague of mine and he, dear friend, love him like a brother, but we had a great conversation about his perception of what Christian values are or should be in this country. And he had witnessed something that contradicted his understanding of Christian values. It was an individual, a transgender individual, had won some type of a pageant. And this

person, a friend of mine, was really disappointed at what we are teaching our children and what this means and how is this going to impact the understanding of what's right and wrong. And very, very, very clear on his position. And it came from his understanding of what the Bible declares and his understanding of what Christian values are in America. And I remember pausing and I said, "I'm not so sure the issue is this person's choice. I'm not so sure if the issue is this person's choice or the person's behavior. Could it be your understanding of what should be or your understanding about truth and reality versus what is really real before you?"

Because I'd asked him that if we really did care about a person's behavior or decisions or choices, is it your job to declare and to proclaim how wrong and how evil, how bad, to demonize this person? Or would it be more "Christlike" to sit down, to love, to understand, to listen, to participate, to understand why this person made a decision or why they're behaving this way and not judge and not declare what is right or what's wrong, but to just be with, to sit with. And it opened up a whole nother level of our conversation about, wow, what is our Christian values and what should we be doing? How do we address these things that are possibly contradicting how we were taught to be?

And I think a lot of your work, Dr. McLaren, is really helping us to learn how to see differently, to learn how to love, to live, to exist, to maybe just sit with reality versus try to declare what reality should be. And so I don't know if you have anything that you want to add to our listening community that to even address some of these very difficult things that we wrestle with today from what we were taught from what really is today.

Brian McLaren:

Two things come to mind about this, Donny. The first one is that you demonstrated what an African theologian named Mabilia Kenzo who had a profound influence on me, a Congolese theologian calls, the courage to differ graciously. And so when he said something that you thought wasn't super helpful and accurate, you didn't just say, you are an idiot, you're a bigot. You didn't insult him, nor did you just let it slide. But you engaged with him respectfully and you differed graciously, but you differed. And that takes courage. And I think this is a skill that we need more of in our world. And so the first thing that comes to my mind is that part of what it means to love people is to have the courage to differ graciously with them. I feel like it's something I'm a little better at than I was 20 years ago, but boy, I wish I would've started 20 years before that to develop that skill. So that's the first thing that comes to my mind.

The second thing is how deeply embedded that issue is in our country. Because I grew up in a privileged white family in the suburbs, I was unaware of the history of our country and I was unaware of the Christian complicity in that racial history of our country. And I remember when I learned more about the issue of the indigenous peoples and the issue of the enslavement of first of indigenous peoples and then of kidnapped African people. And I learned about that brutal ugly history. And then I learned that there was a lot of theological ink spilled to defend it. And this wasn't available until recently, thank God, because all of the literature that was published in the 18 hundreds to defend slavery, thank God there's not a market for, so it's not published, but some university presses just in the last 20 or 30 years have started

republishing some of the pro-slavery theological literature.

So when I was writing a book I wrote called, *A New Kind of Christianity*, I went back and I just started reading a bunch of that literature. And here's what sent shivers up my spine. The same methodology of interpreting the Bible that was used to defend slavery, it's the same methodology that's being used to condemn transgender people. And what I realized is that white Christians stopped using the Bible to defend slavery, but they never interrogated the way they were interpreting the Bible.

And I had this sort of moment back in 2009, 2010 when I was writing the book and I said, I should never ever, ever, ever use the Bible the way the enslavers used the Bible. I should reject that method of interpretation as a moral necessity going forward. And that's something I feel is a process of repentance that hasn't made its way into very many of our seminaries yet. Thank God it's in many of our seminaries. But it needs to be in more and it needs to be in more congregations and it needs to be something that people aren't ashamed to say, to say I have a moral commitment to never interpret the Bible the way the enslavers did.

Donny Bryant: Amen, pastor McLaren.

Barbara Holmes: Yes. There are so many powerful moments in that book, *Do We Stay Christian*. One of the things that I love is that it's not all about the abstract and the theoretical. You say, "We are not spiritual ghosts in meat machines, we are embodied creatures". And then you go on to say, "In the future, those of us who stay Christian will need to make peace with our wild bodies, to listen to them, to learn to love them again, to discover God's beloved wildness in them". Wow, that's just mind boggling to me. We are so avoiding the body and its wildness.

Brian McLaren: Yes. Yeah. And I remember being a young boy and adolescence and puberty and feeling all of these wild desires rising in me. And I knew that my church said that they were sinful. And man, I prayed really, really hard for God to just take those desires away. And God was not cooperative at all with that prayer. So what I had to realize is part of the job of being a human is dealing with the wildness of our bodies, our sexuality, our tiredness, aging, illness, oh my goodness, strength, weakness, and ultimately death, which ultimately should be every bit as holy to us as birth. And so this is all part of that wildness of our bodies. And wouldn't it be wonderful if a couple generations from now that there's a Christian theology of the body that is honest and profound and honoring and reverent. Yeah.

Barbara Holmes: Our audience can't see behind you as I can. And behind you there are instruments, they're guitars and mandolins and violins. What does music mean for you and how does it impact your spiritual life?

Brian McLaren: I never planned to be a pastor or a writer. My plan was to be a college English teacher because I loved literature and I loved poetry and I loved novels and I loved science fiction and I love music. And so I was a singer songwriter and I still love to write music and it's just part of my own sort of spiritual practice and sanity to try to make sense of my life. I write books that take 12 hours to read, but I still think there's

something incredibly powerful in a three and a half minute song that can put you in a different experience.

And this to me feels so deeply spiritual because, well, actually the person who helped me understand it, I'm sure would be known to you all and to many listeners, wonderful theologian named Walter Brigman or biblical scholar named Walter Brigman. And one of the things Walter Brigman said, it's so obvious, but I'd never seen it, first he said the prophets were poets, so they wrote poetry. And he said that what prophets do is they stimulate imagination. They help us imagine a world that's better than the world we live in now. And so to me, that's so much of what art does. It helps us imagine. And that's so closely tied with faith.

Barbara Holmes: It certainly is. We're drawing to an end of our hour and I just wanted to take a moment to say, where do you see hope? Where do you see revival in the land? If I can use the language of the charismatic movement, where do you see hope?

Brian McLaren: Well, Dr. B, I'm actually just starting my next book, which is called, Life After Doom, and it's about the experience of living with a sense of hopelessness about climate change and about political corruption and division and economic inequality and so on. So I'm going pretty deep on that subject right now because one of the things that I've become very dissatisfied with is my traditional definition of hope as a kind of optimistic outlook that things are going to turn out well. And I don't know how things are going to turn out in the short or midterm and middle term. And when I say short or middle term, I mean the next 100 to 10,000 years because, and when you think in cosmic terms, we have a much, much broader frame of reference. So what that has led me to do is to say that hope is not believing the odds are in our favor. Hope is not believing that things will necessarily turn out the way we wish they would. But hope is the belief that certain things are worth doing no matter how they turn out.

And I see more and more people living that way. This is the right thing to do. Just yesterday I was reading an article, because I'm interested in the subject, by an environmentalist who said he's lost hope, but he is working to save everything he can save, prairies and forests and endangered species because he loves them. And he said, when I love them, I'm going to work for them, whether it works out or not, because love, it doesn't weigh the odds. Love says, I care, I'm going to do what I can. And ironically, that produces the best chances of a better outcome. So seeing this turn toward love feels to me like exactly what we need at this time.

Barbara Holmes: What a wonderful note to end on. Thank you Brian for a wonderful conversation.

Donny Bryant: Thank you.

Brian McLaren: Thank you. I'm so glad I could be with you both. Thank you.

Donny Bryant: Thanks for listening. We'd like to leave you with a reflection from this episode. During our conversation with Brian McLaren, he referenced some insights that he gained from his mentor/friend, Dallas Willard. In this conversation, he mentioned that Dallas would oftentimes state that your system is perfectly designed to yield the results

that you're getting. And when he says systems, he was speaking about our religious systems, particularly Christianity. And so if you think about it more particularly in our own individual's circumstances, oftentimes what we are practicing and what we are experiencing, the system was intended to produce that result.

And so he posed the question in our conversation, what would it look like if we designed systems that intentionally were intended to produce love, compassion, or people who reflect the best versions of themselves? So I want to pose that to you and to myself, what would it look like if we were to participate and reflect the divine presence in this world in our family systems, political systems, educational systems, communal systems, and yes, even our religious systems. What would this world look like? Thank you for listening and we look forward to seeing you in the new year.