

WGUMC October 29, 2017 "The New Reformation"
2 Timothy 1:1-14

This week the government declared the opioid epidemic a public health crisis, one that's been building for over 20 years. My prayer is this: now that we are officially calling it a crisis, may we also consider it an opportunity to rethink pain control, rewrite prescribing rules and criminal sentencing guidelines, fund prevention efforts and expand access to and research into more effective treatments. We need nothing less than a total reformation in how we deal with drug addiction.

Today, on Reformation Sunday, the day we celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, I feel compelled to call your attention to a different health crisis. It is a crisis affecting our spiritual health. Here in America today, Christianity is in crisis, and we need to take it just as seriously. But we don't need to take it despairingly, because in this crisis, too, there is great opportunity.

So I intend to make you uncomfortable in the first part of the sermon because we need to understand what we are up against. But I will try to make you hopeful in the second part because there are concrete things we can do. All I ask is that you hear me out.

I don't think anyone can doubt that Christianity in America is going through profound and irreversible changes in the 21st century. A few statistics tell the story. The research organizations that have been studying religious behavior for decades tell us that the millennial generation—those who are now between the ages of 13 and 35—are leaving the church at an alarming rate. You thought it was bad in the 1960's and 70's. That's when young people started leaving the mainline churches. But now they are exiting evangelical churches in droves.

Fifty-nine percent of millennials who were raised in the church have already dropped out. Thirty-five percent believe

that the church does more harm than good. Only 2 in 10 Americans under the age of 30 believe that attending church is worthwhile. My friends, this is a crisis.

Rachel Held Evans identifies as a millennial who grew up in an evangelical church. She, too, left her church, but she didn't want to leave her faith. Since then, she has written several books about her journey in search of authentic Christianity. It has become her mission to tell us why so many young people are opting out.

What she has to say is not necessarily what we want to hear. For a long time, church growth experts were saying that young people weren't in church because they didn't like our music or they didn't like long prayers and boring sermons. If we just added a worship band and some video screens, if the preacher stopped wearing a robe, and if we got rid of the printed prayers and hymnals, we could attract more young people.

But Evans says that what is wrong with the church today is not a matter of style but of substance. Church as performance, which is what many big-box churches have become, is driving millennials away. They were brought up in a world of virtual reality and they are hungering for something more authentic.

Here's another thing that is driving young people away: to the dismay of their battle-hardened parents, young evangelicals are tired of the culture wars. They don't want mega-churches to endorse political parties or candidates. At the same time, they do want them to care about poverty *because Jesus cares*. They want them to care about global warming *because our Creator cares*. Millennials look around and see what's happening, and they want church to be a place where they can come together, listen for God's Word and then do something for God's world.

Young evangelicals are educated, and they tell researchers that they don't want to be forced to choose between their intellect and their faith. They believe in evolution and they love technology. At the same time, they don't want to have to choose between their faith and their gay friends. They like to point out that Jesus never once mentioned homosexuality, and they want their church to be less judgmental and more welcoming when it comes to the LGBT community.

By now, you might be thinking that Methodists are in a perfect position to receive these young spiritual refugees from evangelical Christianity, but I'm not so sure. There are lots of things that are going on with the millennial generation, but it all boils down to this. As Evans puts it, young people aren't leaving church because it isn't cool to be there. The primary reason they are leaving is because they don't find Jesus there.

As someone who has invested her whole life in the church, I can say that hurts. But we have to hear it. And this is where the crisis becomes an opportunity. Young people are not all rejecting Christ. Many of them are simply rejecting what passes for Christianity in too many congregations across this country. So it is long past time for a new encounter with Jesus and a new reformation of faith in this land of the free and the brave.

But Jesus is not going to come to us easily. We can't expect him to endorse everything we are doing. He won't baptize our politics nor will he bless our prejudices. He is not going to comfort us by telling us that all we have to do is save our own soul, and we can let the rest of the world go to hell in a hand-basket. No, if Jesus comes to us, the first thing he is going to do is confront us. He's going to ask us why we aren't living the life he died to give us.

The millennials are not the only ones who are longing for Jesus. The rest of us are, too. Though we have many

commitments and they demand a lot of our time, what commitment is really more important to us than our faith? We have a lot of relationships to maintain, but what relationship is more important than the one we have with God-in-Christ? We have been blessed in many ways, but what wouldn't we give up if we could have the blessing of experiencing the living Christ in our lives?

Jesus came to me in a dream once when I was trying to figure out who I was in high school. He came to me in a vision when I was praying after brain surgery. I saw him walking on the labyrinth with me one night in Novato when I had finished my PhD and was again questioning my call to the ministry.

What I took away from each of these encounters is that nothing I have ever known, nothing I have ever longed for, can compare with the love and joy and peace I have found in his presence. I don't know how to describe it: I was entirely filled up with Jesus, and I realized that I would gladly give up my

possessions, my home, my friends, my family, my whole life because when you have Christ, you have everything you could ever want or need.

Though I often forget it and neglect it, that is my reality. For years and years, I had to search for it. I never left the church but I had to fight a deformed Christianity for it. So I totally get it when our young people say what they really want from us is Jesus.

Here's our opportunity and here's the hope. We have plenty of millennials who are still on the rolls of this church. They were baptized here. They grew up here. They were confirmed here. They went to church camp and youth group. They went on mission trips. Many of them encountered Jesus. Then they graduated from high school and college and began working. And if they aren't relating to anyone for whom Jesus is real, they will graduate from their faith, too.

So what can we do? You know their parents. You can get their contact information. You can invite one of our millennials out to lunch or dinner. You don't need to tell them what they should think or believe or how they should live. But you can show them that someone cares and is willing to listen to their lives. They want some encouragement and some strength for their journey. And they are looking for mentors for their faith. Some of you already do that for our teenagers, but our young adults need it, too. In fact, we all do.

They just want to know real people who have real faith and who can show them a spirit of power and not of cowardice, as 2 Timothy puts it. They don't want us to be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord; they want us to live it out loud. They don't want to see us putting a priority on personal comfort over personal growth. They want to see us making real sacrifices to follow Jesus. They want to know how we make the hard choices and how we keep from caving to the culture on

things that matter to Jesus. They want us to ask the tough questions and not be satisfied with easy answers.

I bet they're glad that we are housing the homeless, but do they know why? Do they know that it's because we see Jesus in the eyes of the poor? Have we told them that? They see us blessing prayer shawls, visiting people in the hospital and holding funerals for grieving families. Do they know that we do this because when you are willing to enter into someone else's pain you are getting really close to Jesus? They want to know why they should read the Bible. Do they know it's because the Bible is a radical book about Jesus, and if we really take it seriously it will turn our world upside down and our life right-side up?

These are the makings of a heart-warming, world-transforming faith. And sharing that faith with millennials is the opportunity in our crisis. But the reformation that needs to happen will never happen if we keep hiding our light under a

bushel basket. If we continue to live as "hidden Christians," we will not only snuff out the flame of our own faith, but the faith of countless others as well.

So, I leave you with the truth you already know: If we want God to reform the church we're going to have to let the Holy Spirit rekindle our faith. [Light candle] Let's pray.