

When Your Faith Feels Like a Lie

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Preacher: Tonetta Landis-Aina

[0 : 00] All right, so again, the first thing that I want to say to you all is that I am very excited to be back among you. I'm a little nervous, but I feel like it's my first day of school, but I am super grateful to be here.

I have a lot of catching up to do with all of you in terms of like what your summer's been like. There are some of you I don't know, so I would love to meet you. And of course, I have to do the thing you always have to do when you go back to work.

I got to read all my email. So I want to say if you are an expert in inbox zero, I need you to sign up for that talent show. I need a free consultation. I might have to rig the system. All right. Sign up.

The second thing more seriously that I have to say is that I am just really grateful that I get to serve in the kind of church that gives its pastors sabbaticals.

Even many churches who do give their pastors sabbaticals, they do it grudgingly or they don't actually honor the boundaries of their pastors.

[1 : 08] They be showing up and everything. You know, I don't know. But I'm grateful that I get to serve in a church that supports the genuine need of pastors to rest, to take off their identities as pastors for a while and to lean into something else.

I'm thankful that we are a church that follows the God of rest. I hope that is true as much in the congregation as we're trying to make it among the staff.

This is the God of rest who encourages all of us to practice the art of escape from all the forces of the world that so actively conflate our work with our worth.

Now, if you are wondering like what I did over sabbatical, I, you know, I'm finally calling my sabbatical hot pastor summer, which every time I say it, Bukola kind of is like, don't say that again. It's a dad joke. It's a dad joke. I love dad jokes. And my hot pastor summer meant that I read a lot and just like laying around, you know.

[2 : 24] I read everything from a novel about the Nazi occupation of Poland to lesbian romance that was set in the zombie apocalypse. It was so good, y'all. It was so good. OK.

Very holy, very holy things I did. I also read this amazing book about Christian anarchism called Jesus and Abolitionist, which made me think a lot about the way in which acts continually, continually shows Christians to be ungovernable.

We cannot be governed. And we are those who have our allegiance to Jesus above all else, not to a ruler or to a ruling system. And then aside from all of that reading, I worked on recovering my identity, the identity I had in my 20s as a hippie artist.

I used to wear bell bottoms. I thought it was cool. It was not cool, but I thought it was cool. So I worked on that. Oh, thank you. Thank you. Some of y'all were there, too. That's what that is.

Bukola and I got to watch and play a lot of tennis. I think I put a picture. We went to the city open, which was very, like, I felt so bougie. And it was joyous. It was wonderful. My parents came and my siblings, which they haven't been to D.C. in years, so that was really wonderful.

[3 : 46] And our kids, Bukola and me, our kids, we got to spend two weeks in Europe, the end of the summer, mostly in Turkey. You can see us in front of Hagia Sophia. And then a little bit in Switzerland.

So overall, it was this genuinely amazing story. Bukola and I will talk your ear off about the trip to Turkey if you are interested. We had a great time. Yeah, between all of that goodness, there's one thing that honestly did not happen this summer.

That is that I never attended church, y'all. I did not attend church. I didn't attend this church. I didn't attend any other church. I was at the house.

And just keep in mind, I'm somebody who has a list of churches that they want to visit. And I was like, oh, it's the summer. I'm going to churches. I'm a neat pastor. No, I was at home in my bathrobe.

And it was great. All summer, I just felt this pull to just stay at home on Sunday mornings.

[4 : 53] To practice silence and solitude. It was probably a really good education in how some of you might feel when you choose to attend that bedside Baptist.

I get it more now. It reminded me that there are these seasons when God draws us into solitude and there's always this dance between community and solitude that we have to be really aware of. Sometimes my Sunday was marked with this deep silence in which I could just sense the fullness of God. But often it was a solitude in which I felt compelled to just sit and listen to the kind of gospel music that I grew up with in my childhood.

The kind of soundtrack of my childhood. I listened to On Time God by Dottie Peoples. Some of y'all know that song.

Order my steps in your way. Some of these songs from back in the day. But there was this one song that really came up for me that was not a part of my childhood, but it ended up being like my summer gospel jam.

[6 : 08] I listen to it all the time, even during the week. It's a song called I Won't Go Back by William McDowell. And I would listen to it and I would feel this deep awareness of God's faithfulness to me.

It would just take hold of me. And the opening lyrics just repeat these words. I've been changed, healed, freed, delivered.

I found joy, peace, grace, and favor. Then the chorus that runs through the song repeats.

So I won't go back. Can't go back to the way it used to be. Before your presence came and changed me. To me, those lyrics are less about some kind of pie in the sky joy detached from pain. And they're more about the way God goes with us through all the mountains and the valleys and the open plains of our lives. The way that in God's presence we are changed and being changed, healed and being healed, freed and being freed, delivered and delivered and being delivered.

[7 : 28] On those Sunday mornings, I got to review the ways in which the good shepherd has carried me. And at some point, there's a piece of scripture that started to come up for me.

And it might be a familiar one to some of you. It says, for I am not ashamed of the gospel. Because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes. Another way to say that.

I am proud of the gospel. I boast in the gospel because it is the life giving and right making power of God that unleashes liberation.

Previously, that verse had sat in my head and it had been attached to like this kind of youth group zeal. That was centered in like a kind of moral purity. This past summer, I was able to hear those words in the sense that they might be necessary to reclaim in order to live out the kind of faithfulness to which God calls disciples.

[8 : 51] I started to sense that they might be necessary words for all of us as we hear helicopters circling at night and see delivery drivers pulled over by people in unmarked cars.

As we wait for the next executive order to drop, the next right to be taken away. In this season, we need a deeper faithfulness to the gospel of Jesus and its power to bring liberation.

And I sense that to get to that deeper faithfulness, we are being invited to become more ashamed. So I want to just take us to the passage of scripture where that verse is found.

It'll be on the screen. Feel free also to look at it on your phone or if you have a Bible. It comes at the very beginning of Paul's letter to the Romans, the churches in Rome.

This is Romans 1, 8 through 17. First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you.

[10 : 10] Because your faith is being reported all over the world. God, whom I serve in my spirit in preaching the gospel of his son, is my witness how constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times.

And I pray that now at last by God's will, the way may be open for me to come to you. I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong.

That is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith. I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that I plan many times to come to you.

But I've been prevented from doing so until now. In order that I might have a harvest among you.

Just as I've had among the Gentiles. I am obligated both to the Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the

wise and the foolish.

That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are in Rome. For I am not ashamed of the gospel. Because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes.

[11 : 26] First to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed. A righteousness that is by faith from first to last.

Just as it is written, the righteous will live by faith. Okay, so first of all, these lines come in a pastoral letter from Paul to the churches in Rome.

The Roman church consisted of both Jews and Gentiles. And these two groups had very different ideas of what faithfulness looked like. What proper religious observance looked like.

Basically, they disagreed about how to follow Jesus. So Paul writes to them about how to live as a community of peace across lines of difference.

He wants them to understand how both Jews and Gentiles fit into the plan of God's liberation. And he wants them to know that they are both essential to that plan.

[12 : 30] That they won't have liberation without the other group. The first half of chapter one is Paul's formal greetings to these churches. He starts by identifying himself in verse one as a servant of Christ called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God.

Then he moves on in verse five to identify his mission. Through him, we received grace and apostleship to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith for Jesus name's sake. And then he further explains that he is obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish. And that is why he is eager to visit the Romans, the disciples living in Rome, which is the heart of the Roman Empire.

Most scholars consider verse 16, for I am not ashamed of the gospel that those that verse with verse 17 as well.

They consider it basically the thesis of the entire letter of Romans. Now, I have to say, I don't know how y'all interact with Paul, but I was surprised.

[13 : 40] I enjoy Paul, but I was still a little surprised that this was the one piece of scripture that emerged from me so strongly over the summer. Paul's letters are often viewed by women and black folks and LGBT folks as, you know, a little bit scary.

They feel a little suspicion. We sometimes feel a little suspicion. Just last year, I preached on the passage that's right after this one, which is Romans 1, 18 to 32, and working to think about and reclaim the way that that passage has to say about same sex relations and to consider that it might not say what many of us have been taught that it says or have the same relevance.

But having this I am not ashamed line resonating through my soul this summer made me realize that I have come to actually feel a certain kinship with Paul more than I realized.

He's sort of this outsider apostle. He doesn't have the credentials of having traveled with Jesus, so he's in some ways self-appointed. Paul hears Jesus call his name, tell him that he has a certain calling, and he trusts that that calling, that sense enough to tell people about it.

As someone who has felt this calling to full-time ministry since I was a teenager, but who does not fit the description of a pastor, and definitely not of a co-lead pastor in a thriving church, which I sometimes do feel like an imposter.

[15 : 15] Whenever I read Paul's letters, I wonder if he did too. I wonder where all of his confidence came from and whether I can tap into it.

And reading Paul with all of you reminds me that some of you might feel like you're an imposter to your own calling, an imposter to leading in your workplace or leading your family or leading even in this church.

Because you maybe feel like you don't fit the description. Or maybe you feel like an imposter to Christianity itself. Because you still don't have your theology figured out, or you still struggle to measure up to what you were taught righteousness was supposed to look like.

Anytime we engage with Paul's writings, Paul, the misunderstood pastor, Paul called to preach the heart of the Roman Empire, Paul who had a calling to all of these cultures, which made his own culture tell him he was a traitor.

Anytime we read this, Paul, I pray that we remember that we are not imposters. Nobody else.

Nobody else. Nobody else can display the good news in the exact same way that your life can.

[16 : 43] Nobody can stand in your calling but you. Nobody. Engaging with Paul is such a good reminder of that, that you are not an imposter to the universal church, Christ's own beloved body.

And Paul reminds us that we have a gospel of which there is no need to be ashamed. To summarize, I read through these verses in my mind, I fully realized, or started to, how much shame has played into my own engagement with the Christian faith.

Shame at what I once thought were its limitations. Shame when I found myself as a young teenager attracted to the nation of Islam, shame during graduate school when I fell in love with a woman. And even after rejecting the possibility of anything happening between us, I could feel in my bones that the faith that I at least knew at that time couldn't hold up to the task of putting human beings above abstract theology.

Shame when I realized that the white evangelicalism that I had moved into for my black Baptist upbringing had no prophetic response to white supremacy, the colonial legacy of the Western world, or the suppression of women as the image bearers of God.

[18:25] It had no love for the earth, and it had no love for me. This summer, as I contemplated those words, I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God.

I realized that I had been walking with the Lord for over 30 years, and a good part of that time has been tinged with shame. And of course I disguised it underneath confident missionary work back in the day, or underneath unwavering church attendance, or underneath wordy theological debate. And the thing is that it hasn't just been this shame about kind of what's out there, or what other people have done, or the questions that have lingered in the back of my mind. It's also been shame over what I have done, over what I have been complicit in.

Shame over what I believe the gospel taught I should say and do. Shame over the kind of person I thought that it compelled me to be.

So let me tell you a story that I have never shared from the stage. It is water, okay?

[19:57] My goodness. So when I was 21, and in college, I won a scholarship to study the Sandinista and Cuban revolutions abroad with other students, small group of other students from across the country.

I was not out as queer, and I was very much the kind of buttoned up, sold out for Jesus young person that my churches had taught me to be. I rarely went out with the other students to enjoy the nightlife of Managua and Havana, which I deeply regret now.

But there was this one night when I actually did go out, and everyone, you know, except me, of course, had had a decent amount to drink, so people's inhibitions were down.

And I found myself alone with this other student in this courtyard while we kind of waited for another student to, like, come back. This other person knew that I was very religious, and she was openly gay, and so she started to question me about kind of my religion and my beliefs.

And they were these really honest questions. And then finally, after a little while, she asked me, do you believe that I am going to hell because I am gay?

[21:29] I spent a couple of minutes thinking about that and basically theologically kind of ducking and diving. And finally, when I read out of words, I responded, yes.

And I could feel, like, the lead in my stomach when I said it. Like, okay, something is off about this, but this is what I have been taught to believe.

This is who I must be. And I'll be honest, there are other individual moments over my life that I can think about that I wish so badly I could snatch back.

And that one ranks at the very top of that list. This summer, this summer, as I sat in solitude on most Sunday mornings, as I listened to the song, I Won't Go Back, I got to consider personally Paul's statement and where I am with it.

Paul's unashamedness of the gospel. Paul's boasting in what he knew to be the power of God for liberation. I got to inventory the limitations of the counterfeit gospels I have believed and the ways that I personally have hurt people by evangelizing those gospels.

[22:58] And as I sat in the love and mercy of God, I realized that I feel yet another kinship with Paul. I am less ashamed than I have ever been.

Less ashamed of this power of God for liberation. I have realized that I feel this renewed desire for all of us to be less ashamed and more grounded in the gospel of God that is life-giving and right-making.

The gospel that is summed up so well in Paul by just a few words when he writes to his protege, Timothy. Remember Jesus Christ.

Raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal.

Y'all, I'm back from sabbatical and the very two questions I want to ask you are these. What do you know the gospel to be?

[24 : 13] Not because somebody told you, but what do you know in the depths of your being? And second, when you consider what you thought was the gospel or currently think is the gospel, where do you feel shame?

This week, I want to challenge you to spend a little bit of time with each of those questions. I think one practice that could be helpful is to kind of write out some of the things that you believe.

Just jot some ideas down to get some clarity. The summer, I found myself doing just that, writing down some ideas. I think I'm just going to share two.

I'll share two. I have more, but you know, I can get long-winded. So the first one, I realized that the gospel of God reminds me that God is not a slaver zealous for his cargo or the master of a plantation from which there is no escape.

Instead, the words of scripture are true, that God is, I am who I say that I am, which if anything means that God must first be the God of absolute uncontained freedom.

[25 : 33] We are created from freedom and are moving toward freedom. God is not a coercive ruler wielding power over subjects regardless of their permission.

Rather, God's power is that of loving influence grounded in consent and ever-seeking collaborative relationships of mutual communion and action. And I wrote a few more and they're all wordy.

You don't need to be as wordy, but jot down a few ideas to help you think about what is the gospel? What are the implications of the gospel?

How do the scriptures, the community of faith and your own experience lead you to understand the gospel and its implications? And then that second question, when you consider what you thought was the gospel or currently think is the gospel, where do you feel shame?

And is that because of a false belief? Or is it simply because of discomfort that you need to work on identifying? How might shame resilience and the practices that shame researcher Dr. Brene Brown recommends, such as understanding shame triggers, did Brene get a clap?

[26 : 48] Did I ask? A snap? Okay, that's good. But how might some of the things that she recommends, such as understanding shame triggers and speaking our shame stories among friends, how might they support our faithful walk with Jesus?

Our shame can be a barrier to our passion for God, that desperation that Jess and the worship team sang about. Our shame can fuel this kind of relentless anger at those other Christians, the very ones that we used to be, and it can draw us into this kind of new fundamentalism.

And our shame keeps us out of community. It keeps us from being vulnerable and empathetic. This summer, I realize more that to get to a deeper faithfulness, what Paul calls the obedience of faith, we need to be more unashamed.

To know the gospel for ourselves, to know it as the power of God for liberation, that is the kind of faithfulness we will need to keep marching in the streets week after week, to keep protecting families as they take their kids to school morning after morning, to keep filming when we see federal forces doing something unjust night after night.

I once heard activist Dr. Alexia Salvatierra, she said something, she spoke to our learning cohort, and I once heard her say something that I will never, ever forget. She said that during the Civil War in El Salvador, carrying a Bible became, if you carried it in public, it became dangerous.

[28 : 38] being seen on the street with a Bible would get you immediately picked up by the military forces. To carry a Bible was considered a threat to the rulers of the country.

It was understood that if you were carrying a Bible, you were likely part of a group of Christians proclaiming the gospel of liberation with your life.

my prayer today is that we would not be ashamed of this gospel and that out of our faithfulness to it, we would be a part of the salvation and liberation that God desires to release in the city and this season.

Amen. Amen.