

I'd be super-curious to know how you might describe a Christian. For anyone shaped and influenced by the culture of this society, chances are we might say that a Christian follows the example and teachings of Jesus. We might say that we Christians strive to love God with all our heart, mind, and soul and to love our neighbor as ourselves. We might say that the Christian life is one of faith, love, and service – we commit to take care of one another. We might say that to be a Christian is to strive for justice. We might add that being a Christian is about understanding that we need salvation, forgiveness, healing, and that this is freely offered and made available to us through our relationship with Christ.

The Christian life in the mainstream of this church, the Episcopal Church – as I believe it is in the other so-called 'mainline' denominations - the Christian life is most usually understood by the way it's lived, or by what is believed. Do we espouse accepted Christian beliefs, do we live morally sound, values-driven lives? Are we attending church, participating in the right rituals, generously giving of our time, money, and talent?

While these characteristics of a Christian undoubtedly are a part of the Christian life – what's been lost along the way, in the culture that is the mainstream of Anglo-American church life, what's been lost is any serious emphasis on how it *feels* to be a follower of Jesus, the importance of the spiritual experience of being Christian. I'd wager it's not so easy for many of us to articulate that. And I think our not knowing what to do with the felt *experience* of faith, as it's a part of our personal and congregational life, has impoverished the standard definition of *what it is to be a Christian* ... and, I think it's contributing to the decline and the perceived irrelevance of the so-called 'mainline' churches, like the Episcopal church.

Published reports in the news frequently give us the same message: fewer people than ever in this country are regular church attenders. And in the US population overall, the number of folks claiming “Christian” as an identity is going down by percentage points every year, and the decline is most marked in younger folks, millennials and Gen Z¹ - the next generations. And yet a majority of folks in this country, including younger folks, do believe that we have a soul or a spirit. Which suggests, at least at a surface level, that younger people in particular do not connect the life and mission of the church with spirituality or the spiritual growth they seek.

A recent survey into the spirituality of young people, noted that if it was to collect data on spirituality in this country it would need to start asking *feeling* questions, not just questions about behaviors and beliefs. And so they asked how frequently folks *felt* a sense of wonder about the universe, how frequently they *felt* a deep sense of spiritual peace and wellbeing, they asked about their feelings of a *sense of connection* with humanity and their *awareness* of the presence of something beyond the material world. And they found that 7 out of 10 consider themselves to be spiritual or say that their spirituality is very important to them.²

And these same people hold a fairly dim view of the institutional church, not believing it be a place for the cultivation of spiritual knowledge and experience, or for spiritual development and practice, or for spiritual expansion and the exploration of spiritual wisdom. In fact, though, ours *is* a tradition of great spiritual depth and practice, it is a true gift to the world that the church these days tragically keeps very well hidden.

¹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>

² <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/12/07/spirituality-among-americans/>

Ours has become a tradition primarily of thinking and doing, yet at its very beginning and at its core still is spirituality, is experience, is feeling.

Being human is kinda wild - we have the ability to focus our bodies' attention on really complicated physical tasks, we can use our minds to reason and work through problems, and we can be inexplicably struck by wonder and awe, we can be forever changed by the impact of love, we can be brought to our knees in a moment of powerful divine encounter. Being human is amazing, and varied, and complex and it can be untidy. We can be gripped by feelings of fear or overwhelm contemplating the nature of existence, or our own mortality, we can feel empty or stuck in our spiritual lives, sometimes we can a bit lost because we feel nothing at all; all this is part of who we are, in mind, body, and spirit. And church is where we should be bringing it all, our thinking, our doing, *and* our feeling. We need to explore and integrate all of it in our life as Christians.

And yet so many of us have been taught to cope with the unpredictable and sometimes uncomfortable mystery of it all, of being fully human in body, mind, *and* spirit, by learning to ignore a lot of what it is to be human. In this society, for sure, we're encouraged to focus especially on our doing, our productivity, and eventually we, many of us, come to spend little to no time cultivating an awareness of the ever-present and expansive experience of our full being. We can come to delude ourselves into thinking that this being human is actually quite a manageable, practical thing, especially if we stay busy enough, in body or in mind.

And yet, *feeling* is our most ancient of ways of "knowing," it's direct and can be unmediated, it's our embodied, incarnational response to the world around us, to the reality and truth of God; experience comes before thought.

The fullness of our human experience can certainly sometimes be intimidating, bewildering and yet – paying attention and cultivating this aspect of ourselves, of being human, is undoubtedly a core reason for the very existence of our church, the gathering, the rituals, the sacraments. The institutional church, including this Episcopal Church, must reclaim its role in cultivating our spirituality, our ability to feel deeply the experience of being Christian .. in addition to our ability to think well about it, and to act soundly in response to it. Our society, and especially the next generation, is hungry for places and spaces and ways to cultivate this core part of what it is to be human.

When Mary and Elizabeth meet, Elizabeth’s unborn child leaps with joy. Mary is pregnant with Jesus, God made flesh, embodied mystery destined to restore the broken relationship between God and creation, destined to draw humanity back into intentional union with God .. Jesus’ birth is the birth of a new creation, one in which God is alive and is fully present. And Mary sings out “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!” At the very beginning of our Christian story is pure experience, is feeling, is spirit.

As we anticipate Christmas, as we consider what it is to be Christian – I hope we’ll always make time and space together, here, to consider what it feels like to be Christian. To explore and cultivate an awareness of the powerful and transformational *experience* of following Jesus. And to infuse our life at and as St. Ben’s with spiritual wisdom, meaning, depth, and practice because this is what’s missing for so many when they think about what it is to be a Christian, and this is what so many of us are hungry for ... and Jesus came so that we might be fed.