

# Have fun on purpose manifesto<sup>1, 2</sup>

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Psalms 17; Genesis 32:22-31; Matthew 14:13-21

I can't remember which wise mentor said to me, "you know, a sermon is just you talking to God and a bunch of people listening".

So here I go. I'm working it out. It's between God and me and you get to listen.

There's been a lot of things on my heart this week.

- We had a special PRC meeting to discuss major proposals that will go to Assembly that could be designed to 'save' the church OR be seen as shoving the deckchairs around to buy time on a sinking ship.<sup>3</sup> (Mind you, a sunken ship because a new home for different creatures. I believe in a resurrection church!)
- Which directly fed my anxiety about "Christian Nationalism" which is sweeping America and is anything BUT Christian and is leading to many people 'de-converting' – otherwise, coming out and declaring they are NOT Christians because they cannot abide by what is being said and offered as 'Christian'.
- Which made me feel very tired ... so when I read Sarah's article about having fun on purpose talking about having agency over mental, spiritual and physical health, it really spoke to me. And that brings me to our Matthew reading...
- The first line of the reading says "Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself."

You know, he just heard his friend and mentor had been murdered. He needed time to grieve, pray and heal ...

"But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns."

So what did he do? "When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick."

The call is the call. In Ministry, there is little space for agency...and what little there is, we often sacrifice it. Why is that? Lord, I'm asking.

Admittedly, a lot of the de-conversions' are people from very closed, charismatic, Pentecostal communities that have their own 'truths' and brook no others. When people break out of these communities and find that there are other perspectives on scripture; feminism and sexuality, they feel betrayed...and they throw the baby out with the bathwater.

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<sup>1</sup> If by Manifesto you mean "loose and arbitrary made-up collection of ideas without any basis in research"

<sup>2</sup> Inspired by article of the same title by Sarah Bessey from *Sarah Bessey's Field Notes*, 26 July 2023, <https://sarahbessey.substack.com/>

But there are many more 'others' who just don't want to be affiliated with the movement towards the right, the anti-gay; anti-immigrant; pro-capital punishment; pro-gun; pro-war; anti-abortion; etc. They are feeling estranged because it seems you can't call yourself a Christian in America if you don't subscribe to a whole list of dangerous and toxic beliefs. They feel like they have no place to go and the pressure to conform to 'the cross on the lawn'<sup>4</sup> is harrowing.

And then there is the discomfort in owning what we, as churches, have done in the past. Society puts on us, as individual Christians, all the sins of all the churches: the inquisition; the crusades; workhouses; missions forcing assimilation and erasing culture and language; and child abuse. Some church leaders are still in denial but we own it. It is our history. Just as slavery was in the Old Testament, promoted by Christians because of that AND anti-slavery grew out of social justice movements in the modern church. Humans are both good and bad. I confess. I am sorry.

Take Jacob. He's a tricky bloke, full of his own ambition. But he got better. He had his moment when he recognised God's business in the world. He dared to wrestle with God and so should we. We dare to wrestle with church, and scripture, and right and wrong; social justice; and reconciling the past ...and faith. And yes, sometimes, we will come out bruised.

I confess, because the Uniting Church is willing to stand behind our indigenous brothers and sisters...because we have reconciliation and working with other faiths as part of our Basis of Union doctrine; because we are Biblical scholars not propagandists; we are often referred to as the church "that doesn't believe in anything" – by both orthodox and conservative churches. Churches that demand you believe everything they determine. You **have** to give up your agency and your intellect to belong. But not to THIS church.

Jesus looked nothing like what Christian Nationalism is offering. Sarah said, it wasn't faithlessness that led her to deconstruction: it was her faithfulness. And

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<sup>4</sup> There's a movement, especially in the deep south that you need to 'proclaim' by putting a cross on your lawn (like all your neighbours) as a reaction to the 'anti-Christ of the 'woke' movement but what it really means is you subscribe to all of their conspiracy theories and anti-anti-anti positions.

it was mine too. When I discarded all the stuff I'd been told and was out in the wilderness, it was Jesus whose words rang true.

Sometimes I think the secret guilt that churches feel gets transferred through their services to the people...kind of off-loaded, if you like. Now I, as a church, can feel all shiny and fine, and YOU are guilty and sinful and must crawl home every Sunday promising to be better. But that doesn't sit with the God who loves us and wishes us to flourish and find companionship and happiness. I'm with David, dancing almost naked before the arc. I believe that faithfulness should lead to inner peace and outright joy. When a kookaburra laughs, I laugh too.

We worry too much. What if the church had only 5 years to live<sup>5</sup>? What should we do? Well, for one, we wouldn't get dressed up on Sundays. I'd be in my tracky-dacks. We would have no sacred cows. Nothing to be defensive about. No reason to be offended. So we could make jokes when we pray – I know there's usually deadly silence when I crack a joke. We could Baptise on the side of the road like Phillip. And you know what else? We could cancel every single committee meeting and spend more time in each other's homes. We would share the eucharist more often and in more places. We could sell the buildings and feed the hungry. We could abandon all this seriousness and turn the font into a chocolate fountain.

No kidding. I told the JNC when they picked me, I was dangerous.

What I'm saying is that I spent<sup>6</sup> a whole day and a lot of precious time, working hard with other members of the PRC to advise Synod on ways to 'save' the church – or at least prolong its future...when I know there is a better Kingdom coming. The church is not the garden...it has been the seedling bed...but we know scattered seeds will do what scattered seeds do. Some will take root in faithfulness – and some will not. Was it a good use of my time, Lord?

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<sup>5</sup> This is inspired by Nadia Boltz-Webber's *Ziggy Stardust and the Future of The Church*, published 1 Aug 23 on the blog "The Corners"

<sup>6</sup> 1 Cor 3:18 - 18 Do not deceive yourselves. If any of you think you are wise by the standards of this age, you should become "fools" so that you may become wise. 1 Cor 4:10 - 10 We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honoured, we are dishonoured!

I'm tired. I need to have some fun. But like most grownups, I have to actually plan to do it on purpose. My life is sorted between the sacred and the secular.<sup>7</sup> What Sarah calls the 'Jesus-y' times, church, serving, pastoral care and quiet times take up  $\frac{3}{4}$  of my life and the ordinary things that bring joy are plonked in the secular pile, somehow devaluing them and ranking my own health and happiness in the less-than or absent-of-God's-spirit pile.

This is stupid. I'm sorry, Lord.

I Know. But the notion of just having fun, seems privileged and selfish. Let me be a fool for Christ. Let me dance before the arc. Let me blow horns and shout for joy. Let me let me have playtime in the sun.

I *know* finding ways to have fun – even in the worst circumstances is good and healthy. I *know* this from my chaplaincy. I can't tell you how many patients I have shared a belly laugh with or how important it is after a natural disaster to create a circumstance where people can just be silly. I know that this kind of fun is necessary. It is healing and helps people engage with themselves and others. It is necessary for people to feel alive again – even when they are dying. The secular is as sacred. You are there.

So Lord, how come I don't do it for me? I know "that it is holy work to notice and bless and bring intention to beauty and joy and fun in our lives. God's grace is also present in everything that brings goodness to us. And more of God's goodness and grace in this world is worth saving, worth noticing, worth embodying, especially when everything is difficult."<sup>8</sup>

It's time to start a manifesto – jotting down ideas of how to have more fun. It's time commit to it. I will start a list – and start to plan...

But...

Why did Jesus turn around? He had compassion for them – that call that is heavy. "They need not go away. You give them something to eat."

We are hungry Lord, with all this wrestling...all this work and this long journey. It is not food we need but water. The stuff of life. Water like laughter trickles into deeper places.

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<sup>7</sup> See Sarah Basseby's book – a whole chapter on fun on purpose and bringing joy back into faith

<sup>8</sup> Ibid Sarah Basseby's field notes

"YOU give them something to eat". Jesus did not produce the food, He encouraged it. He enabled others. Okay, I get it. There are others to share the burden.

But it's up to me, Lord, to find the fun...and share it.

Amen.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> P.S. Thanks for listening, Amen, Amen.