

## Letter to a Young Christian

**Texts:** Micah 6:8; Mark 12:29-31; 1 Corinthians 13:13

Dear Lucas,

It's been a pleasure providing you with the luxe version of a confirmation class.

You've had the luxury of hearing six adult Christians, in addition to Amy and me, tell you what it means for them to call themselves Christian and to be part of a group of Christians who call themselves Forest Hill Church, Presbyterian. They told you of those various faith communities that were part of their spiritual and religious journey, and none of them mentioned regret.

This is in addition to your having been raised as part of a family where the strands of your ancestors' Christian identities and faith journeys were brought together in your mom, your dad, and your older brother.

You've also met it among your peers at school and even in the culture at large.

So you are no stranger to Christianity.

At the same time, you've discovered that Christianity is a big-tent religion, and so to help you make sense of all of those versions of Christianity that have filtered through our confirmation conversations and those you'll continue to encounter throughout your life, I want to try to cut through a lot of the religious underbrush and suggest that when it comes to being a grown-up Christian, three things matter most:

Love God.

Love your neighbor.

And never lose hope in this world or in the world to come.

First, love God.

When Jesus was asked which commandment was greatest, he answered without hesitation: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.”

He wasn’t making that up. He was quoting the book of Deuteronomy. Jesus had a religious tradition that he knew inside and out – that’s why he’s called rabbi in the New Testament – and he understood his religion, Judaism, to be a religion not of laws and rules and sacrifices and ceremonies but rather of love: love of God, love of self, love of neighbor, and love of God’s world.

Notice that Jesus did not say, “Understand God completely.”

He did not say, “Win every theological argument.”

He did not say, “Never have doubts.”

He said, simply, “Love God” and do so without reservation.

That is important because none of us understands God completely.

The older I get, the less interested I am in pretending certainty about mysteries that have humbled saints and scholars and mystics for thousands of years. God is larger than our language, greater than our imagination, and deeper than our understanding.

Which means that faith is not possessing God or putting God into the container of our thoughts, including our religious thoughts.

Faith is loving God.

It is waking up each day aware that your life is a gift and saying thanks to the Giver.

It is recognizing moments of wonder.

It is praying when words come easily and praying when words fail.

It is learning to trust that beneath all things, around all things, and within all things is the presence of the One who created it all, including us, and who loves us enough to make us part of that wondrous creation.

You should know that having a strong Christian faith does not mean that you have no questions.

On the contrary, you should have lots of questions – far more questions than answers, in fact – and I would urge you to exercise your most careful judgment around folks who seem to have all the answers. Those answers are likely to be narrow answers to narrow questions, and you may find that your life doesn’t fit within those narrow confines. Every one of your conversation partners talked about discovering when the answers they were being given became too narrow for their questions.

Faith is continuing to seek God even when questions remain or the answers seem inadequate. The Bible is quite up front about this.

Jacob wrestled with God.

The psalmists argued with God.

Job complained to God.

Thomas doubted.

Yet all remained within the embrace of faith – their own and the church’s. That’s why we preserved their stories.

Love God with your whole self—the believing parts and the questioning parts, the confident parts and the fearful parts.

Love God enough to keep seeking, and don’t be afraid that you’ll run out of God. God has far more answers than you’ll ever have questions.

So love God above all else and don’t worry overmuch about the unresolved questions. As the poet Rilke advised another young man, “Learn to love the questions themselves.”

Second, love your neighbor.

Jesus immediately added a second commandment to the first: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

And then he said something astonishing: “There is no other commandment greater than these.”

Not one of them.

Love of neighbor is not a secondary issue in Christianity. It is at the very heart of it.

The apostle John put it bluntly: “Those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.”

The test of our religion is not how loudly or cleverly we proclaim it, or how many embrace it.

The test is how faithfully we practice it.

Do we feed the hungry?

Do we welcome the stranger?

Do we comfort the grieving?

Do we stand beside the marginalized?

Do we seek justice for those who have been pushed aside?

Do we challenge unjust systems and immoral authority figures?

Do we offer hope to people in despair?

Jesus spent remarkably little time telling people who to exclude, and an enormous amount of time showing people how to love—not with words, but with deeds.

He touched lepers.

He ate with outsiders.

He spoke with women whom society ignored.

He welcomed children when others dismissed them.

Again and again, Jesus crossed boundaries that people thought should never be crossed.

A young Christian should understand this clearly: whenever love and the rules are in conflict, Jesus consistently chose love.

Whenever compassion and exclusion were in conflict, Jesus consistently chose compassion.

That does not mean love is always easy.

It is not.

Loving people can be frustrating.

People disappoint us.

People misunderstand us.

People hurt us, sometimes deliberately.

The word love in our culture has been grossly distorted into a sentimental feeling.

But love in the tradition you have claimed for yourself today is not merely a feeling. Some would argue it's not a feeling at all.

It is a decision.

It is a decision we make so consistently so many times that it becomes much more than a habit or a discipline. It becomes a lifestyle, a way of life. We call that way of life Christianity.

And to love our neighbors as we love ourselves is a commitment to treat every person as someone made in the image of God.

Every person.

The neighbor who agrees with you.

The neighbor who disagrees with you.

The person about whom it is easy to feel warm and fuzzy, and the person who is difficult to be around.

The person who looks like you.

The person who does not.

The person whose story you understand.

And the person whose story you do not.

Jesus even told us that we have to love our enemies, and you'll have to figure out over time who he was talking about.

Christianity is, at its best, the practice of love, which one of our most beautiful hymns puts in its closing line as: "To make the love of Jesus / the story of our lives."

If your faith is making you less compassionate, less merciful, less kind, less understanding, less generous, less attentive to God's creation then something has gone wrong.

Because the closer we move toward Jesus the Christ, the more loving we should become.

Third and finally, never lose hope in this world or in the world to come.

The world, as we know it, will give you many reasons to despair.

There will be wars and violence.

There will be injustice and oppression.

There will be environmental abuse and animal cruelty.

There will be your own heartbreaks that seem impossible to bear.

There will be moments when you wonder whether goodness can prevail.

There will be seasons when your own life feels shattered.

The Christian faith does not deny any of this.

It does not pretend suffering isn't real, which is the reason our central symbol is not a smiling emoji but a cross.

We worship One who knew betrayal, pain, injustice, and death.

We worship One who knew the world because that One made the world.

But the world as we know it is not all the world there is.

History will come to an end, but God will not, and the world where God's rule is clearer than it is in this world – that is the world to come.

That's the world Jesus taught us to pray for when he said, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

Christians acknowledge this world, but we trust in that world, the world to come.

And that is the foundation of Christian hope.

We sing about that hope in one of our best known hymns: "O God, our help in ages past / our hope for years to come."

Or as Paul put it, "If, for this world only we have hoped, we are of all people most to be pitied."

Heaven is the shorthand way to refer to the world to come – the world that we see glimpses of in the midst of the clutter of the world as we know it, the business-as-usual world.

There is beauty, there is truth, there is compassion, and they are real and they are timeless. And we see them at work from time to time.

They will survive the end of history, whenever that comes, and that is reason enough to hope, provisionally, in this world. God has not abandoned it and God's voice has not been silenced in it.

And when Christians speak of going to heaven, as so many do, we're talking about being in the presence of those timeless realities without the clutter between us and those eternal realities. The shorthand word for that clutter is sin.

And so we hope both in this world, where we do catch glimpses of those timeless realities, **and** in that world where those realities do not have to compete with the clutter of our egos, our fears, and our destructive and self-destructive ways. We hope in both of those worlds because of Easter – God's definitive disruption of this world with the love of the world to come.

Jesus' resurrection is not merely something that happened to Jesus long ago. It is the pattern of God's activity in the world.

In the story of Easter, Christianity insists that God's will of divine love for all creation is sovereign, meaning that God's will is capable of overcoming the very worst that human beings can do to try to thwart it.

Again and again, God brings life from death, healing from brokenness, hope from despair.

And the good news of the gospel is that you, Lucas Gabriel Moyer Ryman, can be part of that if you choose to be. Every single person has the option of living for God. All we have to do is choose it.

But if you choose God, know this: you cannot have it all. You cannot choose God and choose this world as the world will tell you to do.

Putting yourself first, for instance.

Ignoring the cost of your decisions, for instance.

Confusing your brand of politics for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Choosing God is not, as many Christians make it, adhering closely to a list of do's and don't's.

Choosing God is keeping your life directed toward God, day in and day out, in large decisions and in small ones.

And if you do that and do it consistently – like practicing your swing – you will get far more than you will give up.

You get resurrection.

You get a life partner whose faithfulness you will never doubt, whose ability will never be in question, and whose love for you surpasses everything you feel or understand.

The Christian story teaches us that Good Friday – the world at its worst – is real, but it is never the last word.

Easter is.

And Easter awaits you every single day.

And that truth – the gospel truth – if you will embrace it, will bring you far more joy than baseball, far more joy than even the best job, and even far more joy than the person of your dreams or the child in your arms. Those joys are all real and they are all fleeting; the joy of the gospel is real and it is eternal.

**And so, let me close with a final admonition: never abandon the joy of the gospel.**

In a cultural moment when many Christians are tempted toward either cynicism or outrage, with some Christians succumbing to plain old viciousness, joy becomes a form of discipleship.

It isn't sentimental happiness. It's a refusal to let fear, resentment, politics, or despair define the Christian life – your Christian life.

Churches will disappoint you. Christians will disappoint you. Your relatives will disappoint you. Inevitably, you will disappoint yourself.

Inside the church and outside of it there will be headlines that make you wonder whether goodness is losing ground. There will be losses that leave your heart aching and prayers that seem to go unanswered.

In those moments, remember that none of those things is the gospel.

The gospel is the astonishingly good news that, in Jesus Christ, God has drawn near to us in love; that death does not have the last word; that forgiveness is stronger than sin or guilt; that hope is stronger than despair; and that God's future is waiting for you and is already breaking into this world.

That is why the Apostle Paul, writing from prison of all places, could say, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice."

Our world desperately needs Christians who know how to rejoice—not with shallow cheerfulness or forced optimism, but with the quiet confidence that comes from belonging to Christ.

Joy is one of the church's greatest acts of witness. It tells our neighbors that fear is not in charge and that cynicism is not wisdom and that love has not failed.

So in this sermon-as-a-letter-to-a-young-Christian, let me end with this:

Hold tightly to Jesus.

Love people generously.

Seek justice courageously.

Practice humility every day.

Keep learning.

Keep praying.

Keep forgiving.

Keep hoping.

And whatever happens—whether your faith feels effortless or difficult, whether the church meets your expectations or dashes them, whether the world seems bright or unbearably dark—

**never abandon the joy of the gospel.**

For our joy does not rest in our own strength or success. It rests in the One who said, "I am with you always, to the end of the age."

And because Christ is with us, there is always reason to hope.

There is always reason to love.

There is always reason to rejoice.

**And that's why we say with our lips and with our lives thanks be to God.**

We continue to worship by singing hymn no. 298, "Lord, You Give the Great Commission," vv. 1, 2, and 5.