

A Missionary Posture

Sunday, June 23, 2019

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

Last November, the Minneapolis *Star Tribune* published an article entitled, “Fastest Growing Religion is ‘None.’” The article claims that “one in four Americans now declare themselves unaffiliated with any organized religion.” That means some 56 million Americans have no church home. That is more than the membership all the mainline Protestant denominations combined. The largest plunge in membership is among people in their 20s and 30s: one in three are now churchless.

The most frequent reason for leaving, according to the articles, is the “disconnect between core Christian teachings and contemporary life.” This does not mean, however, that the “nones” are faithless: most believe in a higher power or God. The Pew Research Center estimates that only a fraction, about 3 percent, of “nones” are atheists, while fully one-third of “nones” believe absolutely in God.

So, what are we to make of these findings? Is the church becoming a quaint relic of a bygone era? Can the church be relevant in the twenty-first century? Is there any way that the teachings of Jesus can still transform our world?

I think there is! In fact, I’ve staked my life and my future life on the belief that Jesus and his teachings are the best hope for the world. What the article highlights is the increasing need for churches to be more aware of the needs in their communities and to be involved in supporting her neighbors. It also pinpoints a deep-rooted need by individuals to feel that their efforts are making a real difference in the world. I believe God’s Word is powerfully transformative: it’s a word the world desperately needs to hear.

Jonah, Jesus, and the apostle Paul all faced the task of declaring this transformative message to a complacent and sometimes hostile world. Shouldering the unpopular role of telling people they must change their ways was no easier in the third century B.C., or the first century A.D., than it is for us as in the twenty-first century. Christian engagement continues to involve candor, tenacity, and a willingness to take risks that invoke both the displeasure of the powerful and unpopularity with the masses. To proclaim Jesus as Lord and Savior today is likely to cause you pain, rejection, misunderstanding, suffering, and even death.

Perhaps the most insidious threat to proclaiming the gospel in the world today is that Western Christianity still believes itself to be holding the cultural reins of power and persuasion. Just as Jonah believed that his position as a Hebrew placed him on some higher relationship with God, Western theology thinks it still sees its own face reflected in the culture surrounding it. This way of thinking emerged when the Emperor Constantine proclaimed Christianity to be the established religion of the empire. The Church slowly changed its missionary posture of engagement and challenge into an establishment position of compromise and partnership with whatever political, economic, or social power was in vogue. Christianity went from being a living faith to a social ideology with almost every aspect of faith becoming in one way or another political, institutionalized, and domesticated.

Indeed, the spiritual warfare of our age is not with secular humanism or secularization, but with the demonic forces that fill the vacuum left by Christian accommodation to the culture. Christianity is most vulnerable when it becomes an establishment religion rather than retaining its identity and integrity as a spiritual movement for transformation. The church is least effective when it becomes entrenched with the culture and complacent, static, and disconnected from the community.

Modern culture consigns Christianity to the sidelines. As agents of transformation, Christians have low credibility because they are perceived as allies with the rich, powerful, and cultural elite. As agents of compassion, Christians are dismissed because a few vocal extremists claim to speak for all Christians. The world relegates Christians to some incidental back burner, ignoring Christians as ineffectual, and consigning the church to the dustbin of history. Hence our shrinking freedoms as Christians. Hence the expanding church-state confrontations. Hence the rise of the “nones” who put their efforts into other organizations.

To be facing this type of environment is not itself a spiritual crisis. A crisis is only created when the Church refuses to recognize that Christians now live in a non-Christian culture. As such, the proper posture for Christians is a missionary posture. Reclaiming the Church’s missionary posture in the world is the path to renewed vitality. Returning to the Church’s original purpose of sharing God’s good news and caring for the poor, the orphan and the widow is the path to re-energized ministries. Retrieving the Church’s gadfly status, pricking the consciences and holding accountable the principalities and powers of all types, is the path of restored integrity for the Church in the twenty-first century.

The conditions that Christians face today beckon the church beyond a "business as usual" posture and into a constant "missionary posture," a genuinely missionary engagement with a modern world and western culture that is increasingly resistant to the gospel. In this sense, we stand today like Jonah facing Nineveh and like Nineveh facing Jonah.

God called Jonah to travel to Nineveh with a word of warning: if the Ninevites did not amend their ways and turn to God, God would destroy them. Understandably, Jonah did not want to go. This was a tough message to speak. The Ninevites were Israel's traditional enemies. What's more, they did not know Israel's God. So, Jonah ran away. He hopped a ship headed in the opposite direction. God sent a storm which threatened to sink the ship. Jonah convinced the sailors to throw him overboard, attempting to appease God, but God wasn't finished with Jonah yet. God sent a mighty fish to swallow Jonah and deliver him unharmed back on Israel's shores.

God renews God's call to Jonah to go and speak to the Ninevites. This time Jonah complies. With fear and trembling Jonah speaks to the king of Nineveh who, in a surprising turn of events, hears and heeds Jonah's warning. The king commands the Ninevites to turn toward Jonah's God and amend their wicked ways. Their repentance is met with God's approval, and the impending destruction is suspended.

Like the other minor prophets, Jonah speaks God's word of warning to people who really do not want to change their ways. So, Jonah takes a missionary posture with the Ninevites. Jonah puts his own fears and desires aside and accepts the challenge of speaking God's truth to a people not favorably disposed to hear it. Jonah makes himself vulnerable, takes risks, and does what is right regardless of the personal cost. Jonah follows God's lead, going into hostile territory, with a word of hope-filled transformation.

Modern day Christians find themselves in much the same uncomfortable situation as Jonah. American culture is changing. New traditions and beliefs press in on what used to be a predominantly Christian culture. Christians are regularly confronted, disparaged, and dismissed. The Church is challenged, sidelined, and silenced. What is needed now is a more missionary posture, a more missionary church.

I've spent the last four years studying with professors advocating for a more "missional church." A missional church asks two questions: "What is God doing in the neighborhood?" and "How can we be part of what God is doing?" The missional church model affirms that since the birth of the church at Pentecost, God's Spirit never ceased to work in and for the

transformation of this world. Somehow, somewhere along the way, the church lost that mode of operating. The institutionalized church neglected to fulfill the command of Jesus to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick, uplift the poor, and set the captives at liberty. The missional church seeks to reclaim the church's active engagement with the world, and to be counter-cultural: transforming the culture according to God's standards.

Pastor Darryl Eyb offers three steps for living as a missionally-minded person or church; Open your eyes; Ask for help; and Speak out! Missional living begins with opening our eyes and seeing those around us as important to God. It means noticing their needs, being willing to step into another person's mess, and offering to walk through it with them. Missional living also means realizing that we are not the center of God's universe!

Missional living means asking for help and trusting God, who is already working in the world, to help us see where and how to act. Asking for help begins with a prayer asking God how to be an agent of God's grace in the world and how we may help one other person today.

Missional living means speaking out! It may be scary to talk to people about issues of faith or to ask about their needs, but when we overcome our fears and begin to talk, a dialogue develops. Speaking out invites people into relationship with you and to experience some of your relationship with God. The simple truth is that Christians have much yet to say to a hurting world. God offers us a vision for how life may be transformed, like it was for the Ninevites, when we seek first God's kingdom and God's righteousness. The helpful and hopeful word that Christians offer is the last, best chance to transform this world into God's preferred and promised future.

Prayer: Good and loving God, you have called us all to your purpose; to live as your disciples. Help us to see that church is not 'our' church, but is YOUR church. That church is not about what we want to see happen, but about what you are doing in our lives and in the lives of others. Teach us to be servants rather than people being served. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Sources:

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