

Behavior Before Beliefs

a sermon by J. R. Luck, Jr
Peace United Church of Christ
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Let me get this straight; we just hired you and you're already taking two Sundays off? Yeah, I know... not the greatest timing in the world, is it? I guess it's not a good time to tell you about a possible speaking engagement in Florida. Anyway, I figured as long as I'm taking 9 days off, I would share with you a little about what I will be doing.

While I will be in the church office this week, I leave Saturday morning for Colorado, Wyoming and Utah. Two weeks from today I will be preaching in Green River Wyoming and in lieu of payment, the pastor has promised to take me to the Grand Tetons and/or Yellowstone National Park, IF the weather cooperates. So please pray for no snow.

But starting next Sunday I will be speaking to the folks of the Rocky Mountain Conference about secular theology. Secular Theology? Isn't that a bit of an oxymoron. 5 decades ago I would have said yes, but no longer. We now live in a world where the lines separating the sacred and the secular have been blurred at best. Think about it this way, megachurches are opening latte bars and food courts while Bono of the Irish rock band U2 is calling on people to make sacrifices for the poor. While the son of conservative icon James Dobson opens an ultimate fighting church where men can experience an unfeminized church - don't even get me started - Clint Eastwood, Dirty Harry himself, made a movie about the afterlife. And then when you turn on the television, none other than Stephen Colbert is giving testimony as to his Catholic faith and what his faith has to say about immigration policy in this country. Did you know Colbert the person and not the persona teaches Sunday School? Weekly? Personally, I think Stephen Colbert has done more for the Catholic Church in the last year than the church's hierarchy has done since the Second Vatican. Why? Because there is a whole generation who won't give the church the time of day, but they will listen to Colbert. He is a perfect example of a secular theologian. He speaks of the values of his faith, but his voice is respected precisely because he isn't a minister or associated with the church. And he's not boring.

You see, people are interested in theology; they just aren't interested in hearing about it from the religious. In the book **Amazing Grace** reviewed in your bulletin, Sociologists Putnam and Campbell devote a lot of pages to the rise of the "nones." Now they are not speaking of "nuns" as in a catholic nun. Rather they are speaking of n-o-n-e-s, or those people who when asked what their religious preference is, they check none. They aren't atheists or even necessarily agnostics. They just don't have a religious preference. Back in 1990 they were 7% of the population. Last year they were 17% of the population. And would you like to guess how old a good chunk of them are? 18-29.

The interesting thing about the generations known as Generation X and the Millennials is that they are very interested in spiritual growth and issues of existential meaning.

However they are more likely to consult a psychic, a crystal, a star-chart, or a psychotherapist before consulting a priest, minister or church. So they aren't going to church, BUT 60% of young adults say they are more spiritual than they were 5 years ago.

So what happened? In short, the religious right happened. If you want a longer look at what happened I would encourage you to read **Unchristian** by David Kinnaman. Now this isn't a book by a liberal UCC'er or even an atheist like Dawkins. Rather, Kinnaman is an American conservative evangelical and while I disagree with some of his theological opinions, he statistically and accurately depicts Christianity's image problem: We are viewed by the world as hypocritical, judgmental, old-fashioned, too focused on rules, insensitive to others and anything but authentic. So while we can watch Joel Osteen pack the people in a basketball arena in Houston, what we can see statistically is that even more people are being repelled away from the church.

Now for those of you who are thinking that I sound more like a sociologist than a preacher, I have two responses. Response #1, thank-you. Response #2, I haven't forgotten about the biblical texts. In actuality Isaiah sounds like he could be one of these 18-29 year olds quoted in Putnam's book.

So what does Isaiah say? God's people are busy. They worship, they study the Bible and by all appearance the country is full of right-living people. But... But millennials and Isaiah and God know that appearances are deceiving, especially when it comes to religious folk. Behind the scenes, Isaiah says we religious types are so interested in profit we'll overwork our employees. We bicker and fight. (In the church? Really?) We wear solemn faces and yet, we are also into ourselves. Like I said, a Generation X'er or millennial could have easily written this. But Isaiah's not finished with us yet, and when he continues he sounds like Bono of U2: Yeah I know you're wondering why God isn't paying attention to you. BUT, if you were fighting injustice; if you were getting rid of exploitation in the workplace; if you were freeing prisoners and canceling debts; if you were sharing with the hungry, if you were inviting the homeless poor into our homes and putting clothes on the shivering... if you were really doing that, then God would answer you in a heartbeat and say, Here I Am.

And that's what happened in the early church; they were more concerned with caring for the needy than proper worship; more concerned with behavior than beliefs. To use Matthew's language, they were light and salt.

Think about it this way. In the first few centuries, the church grew like crazy. Why? Don't forget Christianity was illegal. So an illegal cult was growing despite persecution. Also, don't forget that these aren't people who were inspired after reading a Bible left by the Gideons. There aren't any Bibles yet for the masses. So again, why did Christianity grow? The only explanation is that it grew because of the behavior of Christians. The Romans practiced a type of social darwinism where the best and strongest were honored. Christians cared for and honored the weakest and the most needy. The Romans separated people into classes of differing worth. In the church slaves and women worshipped beside free men as equals. Within this strange counter-cultural group called the church,

individuals sold their property and then gave the proceeds to a larger group so that all could benefit from the blessings of a few. The Romans screamed that these were socialist ideas and tried their best to squash the group, but it didn't work. And so, to the Romans horror, people came to get baptized.

Now this fascinates me. When people came to be baptized they had to spend 2 years in preparation. At the conclusion of that time, the individual appeared before the Bishop with his sponsor and was asked a series of questions: Has this individual been giving to the poor? Has this person been visiting the widows? In short, the bishop wanted to know about their behavior during that trial period, and if their behavior was sufficient then they could be baptized. Then and only then were they allowed to study the gospels and to learn of Christian doctrine. Behavior came before beliefs.

Today we do the exact opposite. We make individuals study a catechism or take a class and they learn what Christians believe. Then they are baptized and hopefully if the planets are in alignment a changed life will follow. Truth be told, it usually doesn't work. We make teens go through catechism class only to see most of them leave until a wedding or infant baptism brings them back. Why are they leaving? I go back to conservative Kinnamann: they see the church as hypocritical, judgmental, old-fashioned, too focused on rules, insensitive to others and inauthentic.

The early church had the opposite problem. But then again, they focused first on changed behavior, and then baptism and study followed. They understood that we are to be salt; that we are light and what that means is that our behavior matters. My brother, who was an atheist, was fond of quoting Nietzsche who said, the church's people will have to look a lot more redeemed before I believe in their redeemer.

I'll be honest with you. While my sermons are known for being interesting, they are not known for their fuzzy feel-good ways. We don't have the luxury to feel-good about ourselves when generations have found our behavior lacking and have judged us with their absence. It's not a pretty picture. Thomas Long, a professor of homiletics at Emory University writes that the church is overpowered, outnumbered and often overlooked in the midst of a teeming, fast-changing culture that neither appreciates nor understands us. But...But I wouldn't be much of a preacher if I didn't give you a but; if I didn't give you some good news. If we were to realize that being salt and light means more than helping our institutions and buildings survive, there is still hope.

Yesterday I found a picture and as soon as I saw it, I posted it on my Facebook page. It is a picture that has the power to change everything and I want it to go viral for the whole world to see it. A friend of mine wrote me back almost immediately yesterday after I posted it. She is a professor and to say she is leery of the church is an understatement. She wrote: Jim you made my day. I want so badly to believe that we are all good." So what is the picture of? The picture was taken in Cairo amidst the protests of this last week. While the week started off relatively peaceful, pro-Mubarek forces very quickly introduced violence. The picture shows Egyptian Christians standing hand in hand forming a circle around Muslims who are praying. They were protecting their Muslim neighbors from

violence and interference while they prayed. When I hear stories of abusive catholic clergy, I'm embarrassed to say I'm a Christian. When Fred Phelps says he is a Christian,... well if that man is a Christian then I'm not. When I hear about denominations and churches fighting over sexuality, I just want to hang up my stole and say,... you know, forget it; it's not worth it.

But that picture. That picture gave me hope, hope that I haven't felt in a long time. And that is EXACTLY what people should feel when they encounter Christians. They should feel hope; they should feel that the world could be and can be different than what it is. The world should look at Christians and see peacemakers who are not afraid to stand against injustice of all. The world should look at us and feel that there is hope because we care for all, love all, show mercy to all, and fight for justice for all. The world should look at Christianity and say, YES! I want to be part of that!

Do people want to be part of this?

Normally I believe it is your custom at this time to stand and say what you believe. But today I would like to sit and reflect in silence on what we do.

- * When people see what we do, not what we say, what do they see?
- * When the community looks at what Peace Church does, what do they see?
- *

And as a newbie, I truly don't know the answers to these questions.

Do they see a church more interested in keeping things the same,
or in reaching out to new generations?

Do they see a church more interested in buildings, endowments and rules,
or in the needs of people?

Do they see a church that treats each other with utter kindness and mercy,
because folks, there's more than enough rudeness and back-stabbing in the world.
If people want pettiness and turf battles they can stay where they are. They don't need to come to church for more of it.

And lastly, I invite you to think about the one person who has most affected your faith, and to consider, not their words, but how their actions affected you.