

Why are you at church today?

a sermon by J. R. Luck, Jr. April 24, 2011 Peace United Church of Christ

Nancy McLaughlin a staff writer at the News and Record wrote a number of clergy this week asking them about C & E Christians; that is to say, how do we clergy handle folks that only show up at Christmas Eve and on Easter morning? Do we chastise a captive audience? Do we make them miss what they are missing the rest of the year? And then she asked why do they come on those two occasions but not to others? So, since I hate preaching on Easter Sunday - it's a lot harder than you might imagine and for different reasons than you might imagine - it occurred to me that answering Nancy's question might make a great sermon.

So let me start with the last question: why come on these two occasions? Why come to church only on Christmas and Easter? Let me offer several possibilities: There was a day and time, especially in the 1950's when American identity and church membership were in essence one in the same. Good American citizens were church members, or at the very least, members of a synagogue. And during such a time, even those members who had little to nothing to do with the weekly activities of a church community came on the two high holy days because it was expected of them. While American identity and Christian faith membership can no longer be assumed - and by the way I think that is a good thing - many still feel the tug of cultural & familial expectations and thus they engage in church life on this minimal level. So part of the answer is cultural expectations. But I hardly think that's the only reason.

Another reason people still come is that they are searching and they're searching for meaning. Yes, church attendance is down across the board, and yes, the fastest growing religious group in the country are those who say they have no religious preference. But that doesn't mean that we aren't all struggling to make meaning of and in our lives. Earthquakes, cancer, tsunamis, rape, poverty, Alzheimer's, infant mortality, unemployment, genetic engineering, global warming, foreclosures, racism, nationalism, terrorism, Wall Street bailouts, fundamentalism, sexual identity, the nature and purpose of marriage, DEATH: there are a LOT of challenges out there folks and there are a lot of people struggling to make meaning of these challenges.

Now in our quest to make meaning, some of us turn to Freud and Marx and even some popular modern atheists like Hitchens. Like it or not, atheism is finding a new voice in our country. But for many if not most of us, Marx and Freud leave a lot to be desired at least they do when it comes to the problem of death. If Freud and company are right then death wins and at best we are the victims of the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune full of sound and fury and signifying nothing.

So why do people come to church on Easter and Christmas, including the inactive? To quote my favorite band, U2, they still haven't found what they're looking for. On some level, I think many come to church at Easter and Christmas hoping to find what they're looking for: some answers, some meaning, something to live for.

Well if that's the case, then why do these spiritual seekers frequently not come back? I think part of the answer is Fred Phelps who hates gays and Terry Jones who hates Muslims. And then there's Joel Osteen and while the smiling pastor of Houston is too busy smiling to do much hating, every time I hear his platitudes I want to gag. If Osteen and Pat Robertson and company were the only option to Marx, Freud and Hitchens then I'd stay in bed on Sunday mornings, drink my coffee and read the Sunday News & Record & the NY Times. Frequently, the church's answers, platitudes and bumper sticker theology leaves a lot to be desired. Many are turning away precisely because we give answers before ever hearing their questions. Many are turning away precisely because we show so little willingness to explore or evolve. Many are turning away precisely because much of the church has chosen orthodoxy over love. A good chunk of the American population is rather fond of the dude Jesus Christ. The church is what they have problems with. Week before last I read about a church, in Kansas I believe, who had agreed to host a group of college students from NW while they spent their spring break doing volunteer work. The church's pastor discovered that a sexuality class at Northwestern had shown

sex toy's in the class. So his response was to refuse to host the students. These students had nothing to do with the concerned class, they were spending their spring break engaged in volunteer work not in spring break debauchery, and, because he was worried about the church's reputation he kicked them out. And we want to know why that generation doesn't come to church; really?

So to a large degree, we're one of the reasons people don't stay: we are perceived as too rigid, too hateful and too stuck in the past. But there's another reason people don't stay. It's too damn hard to be an active Christian. There are far too many expectations. This is a world where everything is instantaneous and microwaveable. The Christian faith is anything but. The wisdom of the world says the first will be first; the gospel says the last will be first. The wisdom of the world says, take and ye shall receive. The gospel says give and ye shall receive. The wisdom of the world says when you've taken your share take some more. The gospel says that when your arms are completely empty, you're starting to learn of fullness. The wisdom of the world affirms preemptive strikes. The gospel says turn the cheek. I mean for crying out loud, why would we for even one minute think that people are going to flock to church, even if it's Easter Sunday. This is a world where we grow up expecting to be entertained, and our primary identifying symbol is a symbol of torture and death. Why would we expect people to flock to this?

So we come because of cultural expectations and we come because we're seeking and searching. And some of us leave as well. Many think about leaving, including clergy, because too frequently the church is a horrible place for seeking and searching. Others of us leave because we have no desire to carry a cross or to make sacrifices.

But enough about other people; what about you? Whether it's twice a year or 52 times a year, why are you here? For that matter, why am I here on Easter Sunday?

I'll tell you why I'm here. I'm here because I've been with too many children who have died. One would be too many; I've been with dozens. I'm here because I identified my brother's body while it was still lying in a body bag. I'm here because I've listened to too many women who have been raped and sexually abused. I've listened to the stories of too many gays and lesbians who have been treated as the scapegoats for everything that is wrong in our society. I am not here because I understand all about resurrection. I don't. I don't understand what is meant that Jesus' body was resurrected but not his flesh. I don't know why Jesus didn't show up on Pilate's front door. I don't know why Mary and the Emmaus travelers didn't recognize the risen Christ. I don't get it. BUT, I do not believe that death has the last word. I do not believe suffering has the last word. I do not believe rape and hate crimes have the last word. I do not believe despair has the last word. I do not believe the stories of those children ended in that Children's hospital. I do not believe that my brother's story ended in a body bag. NO. Scripture tells me that God said no to death; that God said no to despair; that God said no to suffering. And if that means that I'm addicted to the opium of the masses, then give me my drug of choice.

But that's why I'm here. I'm here because I believe in life. I am not here because I have the answers but because I believe in struggling for meaning. I'm here because for all of the church's shortcomings, and they are legion, I believe in struggling and seeking with others who are struggling and seeking. I'm here because I believe when we share our stories of brokenness and partake of broken bread we find wholeness. I'm here because I believe when we pour out our lives for others our glasses become filled to overflowing. I'm here because life just makes more sense for everyone when we stop living for ourselves. I'm here because I believe there is more to reality than this world which we perceive with our senses. I'm here because I believe that hope will win out all evidence to the contrary. I'm here because I believe, to quote Professor Albus Dumbledore, that to the well-organized mind, death is but the next great adventure. And I am here because I believe in Easter. Amen.