

Time for a Purple Church

a sermon by J. R. Luck, Jr.
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In today's gospel lesson, Jesus gets subpoenaed by a lawyer. Jesus there are 613 laws. Which one of them is the most important? Now of those 613 laws, 365 of them are of the "thou shalt not" variety. But apparently what we do is more important than what we don't do because Jesus didn't choose a "thou shalt not" law. Rather he chose a "thou shalt" law. Actually he chose two of them: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind and you shall love your neighbor as yourself. So how about it folks, do we? Do we love God with all our heart, soul and mind and do we love our neighbor as much as we love ourselves?

While in some ways my sermon today is going to be a bit simplistic, and while I am going to engage in some stereotypes, I think there is enough truth in my words that I'm going to proceed with being simplistic and stereotypical about conservative and liberal churches. Let me start with the former.

Say what you want about conservative or charismatic churches that speak in tongues or sing with their hands up in the air or say "Amen" at the drop of a hat, but nobody leaves their worship wondering if they meant it. You may leave saying that was strange, or I disagree with this, but there's no boredom and there is no doubt they are worshipping something larger than themselves. We mainstream protestants have so much to learn from them when it comes to the worship.

In addition, I think conservative churches usually do a better job at taking seriously Jesus' call to make disciples. Bob Thompson is a conservative pastor in Hickory who liberals in the UCC love to attack. Some of it he asks for; some of it is quite undeserved. But during the 6 years I was in the Hickory area, Bob and I developed a mutual respect for each other. Not too long ago Bob and I were talking about worship attendance and why it was so often low in October. During that conversation, Bob shared that he personally keeps track of attendance at his church. And I'm not talking about the overall average attendance. He keeps track of when John Doe is at church and when he's not, and when Jane Doe is at church and when she's not. When it comes time for the nomination process and the committee is considering someone for a position, he pulls out there attendance record. "Bob," I said, "do you remove some individuals from consideration because of their attendance?" He didn't even hesitate. "Absolutely. It's not the sole criteria, but Jim how can they lead if they are not here?"

In the Hickory area I became very active in one of the Rotary clubs which met weekly on Tuesdays. Now because of my schedule, because of emergencies and funerals there were many times I could not attend my meeting. The leadership understood that was going to happen. BUT, I absolutely was expected to go to another meeting. When I was at the Outer Banks on vacation, I was expected to go to the Nags Head Rotary group's meeting. And when attendance at another meeting wasn't possible, I had to go to the Rotary website, read a certain number of articles, respond to those articles and then print off a list of the articles and my responses. That list was then presented to the attendance secretary at the next week's meeting. During the years I was in Rotary not one soul complained to me about the mandatory attendance policy. Now, yes, I did hear several individuals say that they had to think long and hard about joining Rotary because of their attendance policy, but no one ever complained. Come to think of it, I've never heard anyone complain about quarterly dues and fees for Rotary. Have you ever heard of anyone in Masons complain about having to pay yearly dues? I haven't. Now I have heard doctors, educators, therapists and others complain about the cost of continuing education which is mandatory in those professions. And the fees aren't cheap, not even for Mandy on a teacher's salary. But everyone understands the bottom line; they takes the classes or they don't practice their art. On the other

hand, there are clergy who haven't learned anything new since they were ordained in the 1950's and so much has changed in both the worlds of theology and biblical scholarship. So why do we have no expectations of clergy? Why are other professional expected to refine and hone their craft, but not us? If this is holy work, wouldn't it be logical for us to have high expectations of both are leaders and our members?

And so, while, there are some exceptions, over all we protestant mainstream churches have decided that attendance and financial giving and continuing education are optional. Rotary takes weekly attendance and yet, if you want to cause an anxiety attack at most churches, suggest that inactive members be removed from the roles. It doesn't matter whether we haven't seen their hides or hairs in years, we have to be nice. And what would happen if we said this: "I understand you were away last week. No problem. Please know that there are a number of interesting articles on UCC.org. Just read for 30 minutes, respond to the articles and turn in your records to the church secretary before next Sunday."

So question: why is it okay for Rotary but not for Christ's church on earth? Where in the world did western Christianity get the idea that we could show up to worship when we feel like it? And even amongst those who attend worship, why are most leaders in most UCC churches not involved in Christian education classes or small groups? Where in the world did we get the idea that after confirmation we know everything there is to know about theology and the Bible and God and no further study is necessary. Where in the world did the white mainstream protestant church get the idea that we could give an offering when it was convenient? Where did we get the outrageous idea that being a good Christian simply means being a nice person and a nice citizen who shows up occasionally or at least at Christmas and Easter. Where did we get the idea that faith is about feelings? Maybe it's psychotherapy, but where did we get the idea that love is about feelings? Feelings? Really? Make fun all you want of charismatic Black churches but they take their faith seriously. Many of them have two offerings; one for your tithe and one for your gift over and above your tithe. Criticize the Catholic church all you want, and I do, but I utterly respect their mandate that new members have to study for 3 years before they can become members and/or be baptized. Instead of making fun of these others churches, maybe we should be learning from them. I know I haven't been to every church, not even close, but I've been to a lot of churches. I've studied a lot of churches. And here's the thing: High demand churches - churches that require study, attendance and giving - thrive. In this culture you think that it would be just the opposite, but it's not. In fact, I've never known of a high demand church that has declining attendance.

Now, having said that, for all that these churches do right, somehow or another many of them manage to miss the point evening while keeping every letter of the law. After all, study, giving and attendance isn't everything.

Recently the Journal of Religion and Society examined the data from the last 10 years which shows that the United States is the most religious nation in the world as measured by church attendance and the professed practice of prayer. Be that as it may, the US also has some of the highest rates of murder, infant mortality, and STD's in the world. Statistically, the more religious a country is, the more likely it is to have these types of societal difficulties. Even within our own country this same trend can be measured. The Bible-belt and the more religious mid-west had "markedly worse homicide, mortality, STD's, youth pregnancy, marital and relational problems than the northeast where societal conditions, secularization and acceptance of evolution approach European norms." The blue states may be godless heathen, but good Lord, they're doing something right. Indeed, it would be quite easy to argue that they are far better than Bible-belt church-goers at loving their neighbor as themselves.

For all of the problems the UCC has, and they are legion, I salute our church for refusing to separate the love of God from the love of others, especially the love of those on the fringes. We have understood that Christ linked the command to love God and love others and thus the one

becomes a measure of the other. To claim to love God while proclaiming hate to gays or Muslims or non-believers is a lie. And yet, I'll be honest: I understand why some conservatives believe that the UCC is too Unitarian and that anything goes.

So? What do we do? Well, maybe what we need is a purple church. We could start with what the red folks do best. They recognize that there are certain spiritual disciplines that are not optional for baptized Christians and they include worship participation, regular and sacrificial giving, and continuing education and/or participation in small groups and classes. If we do those things and do them well, chances are we will grow. But, if we are to avoid becoming arrogant and insular, if we are to avoid the sin of talking the talk but not walking the walk, we will need all kinds of blue folks. We'll need them to remind us that growing a church just for the sake of growing a church isn't what Christ was about. Not even close. Instead we are to grow so that we can give ourselves away. We are to imitate our Lord who reached out time after time after time to touch those who were hurting and suffering. And blue Christians know that Christ didn't limit his love to those who demonstrated their orthodoxy and proper beliefs. Instead he consistently reached out to touch those who had been utterly rejected precisely by those who worshipped and prayed. Indeed, sometimes they are the worst ones.

Without the red folks, we are at risk of becoming another service organization, just one with fewer requirements; a lot fewer. Without the blue folks, we would be no better than Jesus' opponents who observed every letter of the law and yet somehow still managed not to love. Jesus told us to love God with all our hearts and souls and minds. That doesn't mean doing it when we feel like it. And he told us to love others as we love ourselves. Considering how much some Americans are in love with themselves, this is a huge undertaking. So? How about you? Of these two commandments where do you need to do some work? To what degree are you loving the Holy One with all your heart, soul and mind? How's it going for you at loving others as yourself? Chances are we need work in both areas, but at least in part, that's why we are here. That's why we need to come. Here's where we learn just how much we are loved and here's where we learn just how much is expected of us. Amen.