

Proper 10C'19
14 July 2019
Deut. 30.9-14; Col.1.1-14
Luke 10.25-37
St. Luke's Episcopal Church
North Little Rock, Arkansas
The Rev. Carey Stone

“The word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe”; in the Name of the father, and of the Son, and of the Holy spirit. Amen.

What do museums, hotels, beaches, mansions, courthouses, gardens, and wineries all have in common? They are all, more likely to be picked as a venue for a wedding than a church. That's right, the statistics are jaw-dropping.

Political and religious commentator, Joseph Lupfer cites one study that puts it empirically. In 2009, 41% of weddings were held in a church. In 2017, only 29% of weddings were held in churches, that's a 12% drop in just 8 years! As for priests and pastors, they have not escaped the trend either, in 2009, 29% of couples asked a friend or relative who had obtained credentials from a courthouse to conduct their wedding. In 2016, 43% did not require the service of the clergy for their wedding! That's consistent with the overall trend in America of people who are moving away from organized religion.

The other day Josh Taylor and I were travelling to the cemetery after a funeral. These disturbing trends came up in our conversation and I asked, Josh, why he thought fewer young people were active in church and Josh responded, that

according to his experience with younger people “they didn’t see religion and church attendance as being important to them.”

Statistically, there are fewer Christians in America than there were 30 years ago. More and more children are being raised without the benefit of a religious community of faith. So, what’s the matter with us here today, did we not get the memo telling us that we no longer need to go to church? Can’t we just be “spiritual and not religious?” More and more folks believe so.

This cultural shift can leave those of us who are still active in church believing that the best days of the church are behind us instead of ahead of us. It can be all too easy in days like these to have a mentality of scarcity by constantly rehearsing in our minds the inventory of what all we don’t have. Our minds can go back and forth thinking that there is some solution “out there somewhere” and that if we can just find it, will bring the abundance we long for.

Moses and the children of Israel were in just such a conundrum and Moses addressed it by saying, “Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear

it and observe it?’ Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, ‘Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?’ No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.”¹ What this says to us who believe in being both “spiritual and religious” is that everything we need in order to prosper is right here, right now, in our very midst.

As with most things that truly matter it’s a matter of the heart. Moses said to the people: “The Lord your God will make you abundantly prosperous in all your undertakings, in the fruit of your body, in the fruit of your livestock, and in the fruit of your soil. For the Lord will again take delight in prospering you, just as he delighted in prospering your ancestors, when you obey the Lord your God by observing his commandments and decrees that are written in this book of the law, because you turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.” Moses, strikes at, and hits the target, because the target is our hearts: “because you turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.” They became willing to place the keys to their flourishing and prospering into the hands of God. Surrendering and then following in the way of love and compassion.

¹ Deuteronomy 30.9-14 NRSV

Our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry hit the mark when he said: “Being a Christian is not essentially about joining a church or being a nice person, but about following in the footsteps of Jesus, taking his teachings seriously, letting his Spirit take the lead in our lives, and in so doing helping to change the world from our nightmare into God’s dream.” He echoes the parable from today’s gospel where we see a ‘loser living like a winner’, and those who ‘thought they were winners living like losers.’ The man beaten and left for dead on the road to Jericho is a stiff reminder to us who say that you can be both religious and spiritual that religion alone won’t cut it.

The Priest who was to take the lead in things spiritual and religious when he saw the beaten man passed to the other side of the street. Perhaps he had an important meeting with the bishop to get to, or maybe he was late to lunch. What the parable teaches us is that we can be religious and not be spiritual. He placed religious observance over spiritual practice. Then another person one would expect to do the right thing, the chief worship leader, the Levite, saw the beaten man and also crossed over to the other side of the street to avoid him. He placed the purity laws of the temple above the Royal Way of Love. The parable calls the religious up short by making the Samaritan the hero of the parable. This would have been the last person a religiously observant person would have picked to be a hero, because

they saw them as unclean and untouchable. But by his actions the Samaritan demonstrated that he, the unlikely, the ceremonially unclean was the only righteous one of the three.

I began the sermon by talking about the contemporary religious landscape of America – then headed into a brief look at Jesus’ parable of “The Good Samaritan.” Are the two related? I think so. In the 1960s and 70s our culture, and society respected and, in many cases, supported our religious institutions, regardless of whether they were spiritual or not. What the statistics are saying to us now is that this is no longer the case. Society is no longer willing to support religious institutions that have ceased to be spiritual.

Dear friends of St. Luke’s let’s begin today to commit ourselves again to being spiritual people, who are in love with God, in love with each other, and who are willing to stay on the same side of the street where the broken, and wounded are, and to keep a welcome in our hearts for these whom we can help and who can help us remain spiritual and religious.

Who knows, there might just be some people all over this part of Pulaski County who are looking for a group spiritual people who are seeking to practice this kind of religion...