

The Rev. Dean Lindsey

May 24, 2009

Trustworthy Testimony

The Seventh Sunday of Easter

John 17:6-8, 13-21; 1 John 5:1-12

I think that we've finally turned the corner away from the Chicago winter, and if you are anything like me, you're hoping to spend some time outside today. Maybe some of you wish you were outside already. Believe me when I tell you that we preachers are well aware of the possibilities and the enticements which lie beyond the doors of the church.

In fact there are more of them now than most of us would have imagined a generation ago: school activities, sporting events, charity fundraisers, to name a few, now compete for those several hours a week which used to be reserved exclusively for religious activities. Indeed, if we turned the clock back a bit further, an entire day was commonly free from the normal activities of commerce and even recreation. Once, an old and rather traditional gentleman lamented this change in a conversation with me. He said, "When I was young, we had the Sabbath. Then it became Sunday. Now, it's just the weekend."

Of course, what I am describing did not happen in a vacuum. Little Leagues schedule games on a Sunday now, because they know that the parents won't

complain, and they are less likely to lose their players to a church event than to the myriad of other activities they compete against on other days of the week.

I have learned from experience, however, that pointing out such things can exact a cost. A few years ago, in my former congregation, I challenged the claim of some soccer parents that they were helpless before the powers-that-be in their children's soccer league. I said to them that if they and other parents united to defend some sacred time on Sunday mornings, the league would have to change. Two families in the congregation made the opposite choice. Rather than tangle with the soccer coach, they left the church, instead.

There are many options. There are many activities that we as individuals or families may choose over worship or Christian education or other basic practices of the Christian faith such as time spent in prayer, the regular reading of Scripture, or care for those in need. The response of the churches to these many possibilities varies quite a bit. Some churches just ignore the fact that the society as a whole no longer supports nor accommodates the formation of a Christian identity. Some churches become more and more like the culture; they ratchet up the entertainment value of their offerings, and they keep things moving at a light and quick pace. Some churches become more isolated and sectarian, seeking to cut themselves off from the culture at large.

However, these strategies, though they may yield some success for particular congregations have not had any effect upon larger cultural trends.

Earlier this month, the results of a large study of religious affiliation conducted by Robert Putnam for the Pew Charitable Trust were widely circulated through various news outlets. I am going to quote from one of these reports published under the headline “Young Americans Losing their Religion.”

“New research shows young Americans are dramatically less likely to go to church—or to participate in any form of organized religion—than their parents and grandparents. ‘It’s a huge change,’ says Harvard professor Robert Putnam, who conducted the research. Historically, the percentage of Americans who said they had no religious affiliation (pollsters refer to this group as the ‘nones’) has been very small—hovering between 5 percent and 10 percent. However, Putnam says the percentage of ‘nones’ has now skyrocketed to between 30 and 40 percent among younger Americans.”<sup>1</sup>

What the data reveals is that this new surge of young people in the category of “none” or “no believer” includes many who do not consider themselves unbelievers. They are simply unaffiliated. They say that they have faith in God, but they have lost faith in the church.

Some recent work of the Barna group reached similar conclusions in a study of non-affiliated young adults they published two years ago.<sup>2</sup> They discovered

some broad negative images that figure prominently among those who reject the church. These people—and they may be our friends, our neighbors, or our family members—tend to think that the church is hypocritical, too focused on getting converts, antihomosexual, sheltered, too conservative politically, and judgmental.

That is a bad list. It might be easier to handle if the respondents were largely ignorant of the church, if they had developed their attitudes primarily from movies or television, and the like. However, what researchers tell us is that many of these negative impressions derive from direct, life experiences, bad experiences of the church or the behavior of others who claim to be Christian.

This week, an investigative commission in Ireland released an exhaustive report documenting the systematic abuse of children at the hands of the Catholic church there over a period of eighty years or more. There have been equally damning revelations in this country, too. Oftimes, the church is its own worst enemy.

But here is the thing, and I believe this is hopeful for us. Many who have left the church have not done so because we have not been Christian enough. It's not because we have followed too closely the teachings of Christ. Rather, we have often ignored his teachings, and they know it and stand in judgment of us. They have not rejected the basic claims of faith nor even the values we proclaim; rather

they sense that the church is not a place where these value are being put into practice.

What we need to do is follow Jesus. The Apostle John sums up the task for us: it is love that must be at the center of our practice. Love for one another. Love for our neighbor. Love for God.

Unfortunately, it is so easy for us to get sidetracked. A friend of mine once told me that the longest and most contentious Session meeting he ever sat through was one in which the elders were debating what soft drinks should be sold in their vending machine. “What if they put the same energy into serving the children of their community or addressing the problems of rising poverty?” he asked.

What are the things we talk about here? Are they the things that matter, truly matter to those who are hurting? Even more than the words we speak, do our actions match our proclamation? These are questions the church must always ask itself.

Again, the Apostle John describes the importance of witness. It is never one-sided. It has many dimensions which the world will see: how we treat one another, the respect and compassion we show towards others, the things we talk about and pray about. The things we do. Altogether, these make up our testimony of faith. “Spirit, water, and blood” are the terms that John uses. Spirit, mind, and body.

Words, intentions, actions. Beliefs, proclamation, works. Do they agree? Are they giving the same message? When they are, we become a blessing.

At Community Presbyterian Church, we have a unique opportunity to be witnesses in this community, and beyond, for this generation and future generations.

The reason I say this with confidence is first of all because of the witness that we have provided and continue to do so. But the other reason is because we have kids here — young children, older children, and youth in abundance. Sadly, this is not true in many churches. Indeed the broad age distribution of this congregation is a big part of the reason I am here. I did not want to be a pastor to one generation only. Most likely the presence of a variety of ages — and children especially — is a big part of the reason you are here, too.

However, what we enjoy right now has only a tenuous connection to what will be tomorrow. Our success cannot be measured by the numbers of today but rather by what our high schoolers and middle schoolers, and grade schoolers are doing five, ten, or twenty years from now.

Our success, you see, is not just about today. It's about tomorrow. What will our young people choose? Will they choose something over the church? No, if they believe that we are doing important things right here. There is an expression which holds that the church is always one generation away from extinction. The good

news is the church is always one generation away from a great new awakening.

That is something for us to pray for and to work towards.

Amen.

---

<sup>1</sup> Dan Harris, ABC News: <http://www.pewforum.org/news/display.php?NewsID=18047> (accessed May 22, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity... and Why it Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007).