

Afraid of the darkness, Dazzled by the light

March 2, 2008 | Fourth Sunday in Lent Year A

1 Samuel 16:1-13

Psalm 23

Ephesians 5:8-14

John 9:1-41

America is a country of Christians. While Christianity is an endangered species in the Old World of Europe, we have felt that American was an exception—the most advanced economy in the world, but also a lighthouse of faith. There is still some reason to believe this. According to the recent survey by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, about 75 percent, 3/4 of us, identify themselves as Christian. Nevertheless, there are warning signs. What is the fastest growing religion? It is the “Unaffiliated,” at 16 percent of the adult population. This group has almost tripled in size over the last 20 years. Eight out of 10 of those who are unaffiliated were raised in a religious tradition. While the unaffiliated has grown, our Protestant tradition is declining. Fifty one percent, just over half, of the US population identify themselves as Protestants. This is a steep decline from around 65 percent a few decades ago. Most of these losses have come from declines in the Mainline Protestant denominations, including Presbyterians, Methodists, Evangelical Lutherans, and the UCC. The share of the US population identified as Catholic has held steady, but only because of the large number of Catholic immigrants. Overall, 31.4% of U.S. adults say that they were raised Catholic. Today, however, only 23.9% of adults identify with the Catholic Church, a net loss of 7.5 percentage points.

Another warning sign is the survey’s finding that religion has become less of a family tradition, and more of a personal preference. “If change in affiliation from one type of Protestantism to another is included, roughly 44% of American adults have either

switched religious affiliation, moved from being unaffiliated with any religion to being affiliated with a particular faith, or dropped any connection to a specific religious tradition altogether.”

If 75 percent of US adults identify themselves as Christians, what percentage attends church regularly? One survey found that since the 1970s, the percentage of adult Americans who attend church every week has fallen from 35 percent to 25 percent while the number who never attends church has increased from 10 percent to 20 percent. We can comfort ourselves that we are doing better than most other rich countries. In France, where 76 percent of the population considers itself Catholic, only 12 percent say they go to church on Sunday. Eighteen percent of Canadians are church attendees, while in the Protestant countries of northern Europe from five to 15 percent of the adult population attend church weekly.

When I contemplate these dismal figures, I am reminded of a billboard put up in Seattle in the 1970s when they were losing so many aerospace jobs, “Will the last one to leave Seattle please turn out the lights.” The idea of thousands of empty and darkened church buildings throughout the world is terrifying. How could we have let God down so badly? What can we do to turn back on the lights?

Maybe some of the lessons we need to learn are waiting for us under the dazzling African sun. According to Ronald Inglehart, Chairman of the World Values Survey at the University of Michigan, there is a tremendous faith gap between the highly religious poorer, agrarian countries and the richer post-industrial countries of the world. This gap shows up in three major areas: church attendance, prayer, and people’s rating of how important religion is in their lives. Twice as many people, 52 percent versus 26 percent,

in the poorer countries compared to the richer countries answered “yes” to the question “Do you take some moments of prayer, meditation or contemplation or something like that?” When asked, “How important is God in your life?” three times as many people in the poorer countries compared to the richer countries gave God a high ranking of importance.

When the popular Christian rock band, “Jars of Clay” had a concert at La Croix Methodist church about a year ago, they asked concertgoers to give to the “Blood Water Mission,” a project to bring clean water supplies to rural Africa. One of the audience members asked them if they also brought the Gospel along with clean water. The band’s lead singer replied that they had been to some of villages in Africa where the water project were constructed and that the Christian faith was stronger there than in most places in the United States. He added that the Africans needed to be sending missionaries to us, rather than the other way around. My friend Father Bob had the same experience when he visited a sister church in the southern Sudan, one of the poorest and most war torn countries in Africa. He wrote, “In the southern Sudan there is a great uprising of faith, a joyful flourishing of Christianity...that puts our American church renewal and growth plans to shame.” When Pastor Rick Warren set out to develop a ministry in Africa for AIDS victims, especially orphans, he found that even the tiniest villages had a local church, many of whom already doing what they could to care for the orphans. They were doing amazing work with almost zero resources.

Jesus’ healing of a man born blind challenged the Pharisees, the righteous and faithful people of his day to consider that God was working among them in a new way. The Pharisees initially tried to deny that anything had happened. This could not be the

same man, whom they knew as a blind beggar. When that did not work, they reacted with anger, asserting their own righteousness, “we are disciples of Moses.” When the man born blind responded to their anger with clear common sense, they flew into a rage and drove him away. Their community could not accept a miracle that did not follow their rules, so they drove away the innocent man whose sight testified to that miracle. He was “put out of the synagogue,” a very serious punishment for a believing Jew.

Towards the end of our Gospel reading, Jesus seeks out this man, who has never seen him. When Jesus reveals himself to this man, the man worships him. Jesus seeks out the man who was thrown out of the synagogue to give him a new identity as a disciple. It was not the removal of his blindness that gave this man a new life. In fact, the story emphasizes that the healing does not change the man’s identity. When others questioned if he was the same man who used to sit and beg, “He kept saying, ‘I am the man.’” It is not by the healing, but by the man’s baptism in the Pool of Siloam and his rebirth into discipleship that Jesus fulfills his statement “he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.” If we want to be followers of Jesus, we must realize that part of bringing the light of faith into the world’s darkness is welcoming strangers into our family, the body of Christ.

This Gospel story ends with Jesus’ crushing indictment against the Pharisees, “if you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.” The Pharisees, despite being blessed with knowledge and given spiritual leadership over the Jewish people, refused to see that God had sent his Son to save

sinners and bring the entire world into the family of believers. We can claim to see much better, we who are the children of light. However, have we really done our best to heal our neighbors and welcome them into our Church? God has blessed us with Bibles, church buildings, hymnals, prayer books, trained clergy, and thousands of years of tradition and wisdom. Have we fully used our talents and gifts to reach out to those in need and adopt them into our family? If we are content to be “the last ones to leave,” who turn out the lights in our empty churches, we will surely be judged to having been blind to “what is pleasing to the Lord.”

‘Sleeper, awake!

Rise from the dead,

and Christ will shine on you.’

Amen.

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