

August 27, 2023

Lectionary 21, Year A

The 13th Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 16:13-20

Opinion: I left the church — and now long for a ‘church for the nones’—

Washington Post Opinion Article Published August 21, 2023

Emmanuel Lutheran Church, August 27, 2023

Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Who do **you** say that I am?

Earlier this week, a pastor friend of mine, who I know from the Brookfield Clergy Association that I was a part of when I was a pastor in Brookfield, CT, shared an article on Facebook and encouraged other clergy people and church leaders to read it. So, I did. This friend, like me, has moved on from Brookfield and she is now a pastor in the suburbs of Washington D.C. The article that she shared was from the Washington Post. It was an opinion article titled: *I left the church — and now long for a ‘church for the nones’*

In the article the author details his journey from a very churched childhood as the son of a pastor living in a very devout family and churched young adulthood, he was not one who drifted away from the church during his college years or 20s, to, now, in his early 40s, having stopped going to church almost completely.

One of the reasons for his drifting away from the church was the fact that he found that he differed from some of the more political and, in his estimation, unkind, unloving, or more importantly, unChristlike. viewpoints or policies of many Christians and to a certain extent, of the church that he belonged to. But the other reason that he left was that he found as he aged, a growing sense of disconnection with some of the church’s teachings. For example, he questioned whether God had created the world and whether or not Jesus had truly been raised from the dead. He had spent more than 35 years of his life as an active participant in the church with those kinds of doubts and wonderings in his head, before politics and policies finally drove him away.

And now he longs for a church. He longs for some kind of regular weekly gathering where he could:

- Be with other people and form supportive lasting relationships

- Sing with other people
- Share meals with other people
- Have support in teaching his daughter values such as forgiveness, tolerance, kindness, generosity, compassion, and others.
- Have a weekly reminder about the values to which he had committed himself, which he acknowledged could be hard to live out or easy to forget about in the midst of day to day distractions of work, parenting, and entertainment.

He acknowledged that many people, like him, former church members who had walked away, had no issues or qualms about spending their Sunday mornings eating brunch, doing yoga, or watching Netflix. But he wants something more.

This is how he describes his perfect “church”, what he calls a “Church for the Nones–N-O-n-e-s”

Start the service with songs with positive messages. Have children do a reading to the entire congregation and then go to a separate kids’ service. Reserve time when church members can tell the congregation about their highs and lows from the previous week. Listen as the pastor gives a sermon on tolerance or some other universal value, while briefly touching on whatever issues are in the news that week. A few more songs. The end. An occasional post-church brunch.

During the week, there would be activities, particularly ones in which parents could take their kids and civic-minded members could volunteer for good causes in the community. (Directly quoted from the article.)

Interestingly, what, in spite of his spiritual and political qualms, is keeping him from affiliating himself with some Christian congregation is his daughter. It used to be the conventional wisdom that people who had drifted away from the church would return once they had children. For the author of the article, it’s the opposite. His daughter is what is keeping him from looking more earnestly for a church to join, because he’s afraid a church would contaminate his curious daughter’s thinking about important things. But he also knows that he’s depriving her of something. He knows that there is something valuable in being a part of a church community. Those are the things that he misses about the church experiences and he knows that he is denying his child something by keeping her out of church.

In our gospel reading for today, Jesus asks his disciples an important question. He asks them, “Who do people say that people say that the Son of Man is?” (Matthew 16:13). The Son of Man is one of the phrases that Jesus used to describe himself, so by asking this question, he was asking, “Who do people say that I am?” And his disciples answered, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” (Matthew 16:14a)

And then he asked them another question. ‘But who do you say that I am?’ (Matthew 16:14b)

And we get to hear one of the disciples’ answers. We get to hear what Simon Peter thinks, what he says. ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’ (Matthew 16:16)

It’s a good answer. Clearly, Jesus likes the answer, since Jesus’ response to Peter is, ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven’ (Matthew 16:17). It is based on this confession, this statement of faith, that Peter is called the rock, on which the church is built.

The rock on which the church is built is not on Peter on the man, but on the faith that Peter expresses, faith in Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God.

But I wonder what would have happened if we could have heard from the other 11 disciples. What might they have said, if Jesus could have polled the group. Would they all have shared Peter’s strong faith in the identity of Jesus in his historical and theological importance? Would they all have been in the same place, theologically. Or would some have said, “A good man” “A great teacher” “A miraculous healer” “A good friend” “Someone I love” “A troublemaker” “A man who is doomed” “The hope of Israel”? I wish we could have heard what they had to say.

I wonder what might happen if we were able to answer this question. I wonder what we would hear if this congregation was polled about that we believe about Jesus and what questions we have. I wonder what kind of diversity we would find existed even in the church, about who Jesus is.

I must admit that I recognize that there is probably a great deal of diversity of belief within our fellowship, within our church community. More than might show up when we sing hymns together and kneel at the communion table together or eat meals together or worship on zoom together. I wonder if anyone here, feels like the man who wrote the article, feels like an imposter.

Because I suspect that it’s not that unusual. For any of us, for all of us at one time or another, to have questions, to wonder, to struggle with faith and belief,

when our lives are out of balance, when sickness or loss or despair or the world's troubles seem to overwhelm us. I'll bet that we've all had moments when we've wondered if we have it right, if the faith that we have confessed, if the stories that we have listened to and believed in the past are the whole story or even the right story?

I wonder how we in the church could create safe space for those who doubt and question and wonder as well as for those who believe. Safe space for those 11 silent disciples, whose answers were never spoken after Peter gave what seems to be the right answer.

The man who wrote the article I referenced at the beginning of this sermon was encouraged by someone in his life to try the Unitarian Universalists, but that didn't work for him either. He appreciated their lack of theology, but they were too old, not quite hip enough for what he was looking for.

And I don't think that any church I'm ever going to lead or be a part of would work for him either. He's looking for the church without Jesus. And that's never going to be my church. He's looking for the church without theology or faith, the church that tries to make good people out of sinners without clinging to the grace of God. And that's never going to work for me. Because we're all sinners. All of us. We're all sinners and at one time or another in our lives, probably also questioners, doubters, wonderers, wanderers, seekers, just clinging to the grace of God. We don't, any of us, have all the answers, have it all right, have our theological or moral ducks totally in a row.

This week's gospel reading is a cliffhanger and we're going to find out next week what happens to Peter, the rock, and his great confession of faith. We'll learn that it wasn't and was never going to be Peter's confession that saved him. It was only ever going to be Jesus' love, Jesus' grace, Jesus' forgiveness, Jesus' compassion.

We gather together, because it was never good for human beings to be alone. And what draws us together is not our right theology, or our moral superiority, or our correct politics, whatever we perceive those to be. What draws us together is the grace of God. And that grace is a rock in a stormy sea. That grace is a refuge in a strange and barren land. That grace is a comfort in the valley of the shadow. That grace is a voice crying for justice in the wilderness.

And if you ever feel like you don't belong; if you ever feel like that your confession isn't passionate enough, like your faith isn't sure enough, like your life isn't good enough, God's grace speaks to you and says, you are home. Amen.