

The Stampede Out of The Church and the People of God and Christ Beyond Its Walls
Luke 7: 2-9; Matthew 7: 21

Stampede may be an exaggerated word for the exodus out of the church in America, but no one can doubt the reality. A date has been attached: 2070, the projected date when there will be more non-Christians than Christians in our nation. How are we to respond to this trend? The numbers are accelerating of people leaving church or opting out of church.

This trend has caught the attention of both the religious and secular press. A much read OpEd in the Washington Post by one its younger writers, Perry Bacon, Jr. is a case in point. Its title is: "I Left the Church —And Now Long For A Church For The Nones." The Nones are those who identify themselves as "non-affiliated" in religious surveys. Most of these were once churches goers. It is the fastest growing group in surveys on religion in America. It has grown from around 5% in the 1990's to around 30% today. In a new book "The De-Churching of America", its authors estimate that about 40 million Americans do not attend church who used to do so.

Perry Bacon longs for a church for the Nones. I think we can help create spaces where the Nones can gather and share their spiritual journey. Our collaboration with the Iredell Arts Council, where we bring artists who perform or

display their art and talk about the connection of art and faith in their work and hold conversation with the audience may be such a place.

I

What are we to think of this exodus out of the church? We can all think of some reasons why: those who have been hurt in church. I call them burn victims. We think of the sexual child abuse crisis in the church to which the church has been slow, even criminally so, to take seriously.

There are 40% of young people, 18-29, who are Nones, many disillusioned by the church for a variety of reasons. The editor of *Christianity Today*, Russell Moore, once the head of the Ethics Commission of the SBC, has said it well: the reason young people are leaving the church is not because they don't believe what the church teaches but because the *Church* does not believe what the church teaches.

Some are leaving because of the racial attitudes in church. Robert P. Jones has documented in research and surveys that the white church in America has been, and still is, an incubator of white supremacy.

And we could add the denunciation of LGBTQ persons in churches. Many young people will have none of this. I remember talking to a young adult who said that she no longer went to church. I said to her "I bet there are good reasons

for that.” She teared up, and thus began a friendship and she found her way back to church. We need to be honest and affirming to people who have left the church.

II

But I want to go on and probe the issues of Christian spirituality outside the church. Early in Christian history a doctrine was born, begun by St. Cyprian of Carthage in the third century. It read:

“There Is No Salvation Outside of Church.”

In 1442 the Council of Florence ratified it as official church doctrine. Here is what they said:

The Holy Roman Church...firmly believes, acknowledges and proclaims that “no one outside the Catholic Church”, neither heathen nor Jew nor unbeliever, nor separated from the unity [those tossed out of the church], will partake of eternal life, but will rather fall victim to the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels....

It reads no better in the original Latin.

The Second Vatican Council in the 1960’s, notable for its progressive documents, amended this fierce doctrine by saying that “all men of good will can achieve salvation”, including Jews, Muslims and Christians of other

denominations. You would not be surprised to know that the Second Vatican Council has been denounced by growing conservative forces in the Roman Catholic Church.

Baptists have returned the insult. When I was growing up in Southern Baptist life, Catholics were seen as those not saved and going to hell. We sent missionaries to Catholic countries to save Catholics from damnation, and Catholics were targets of evangelism at home.

An illustration of all the above: Sue grew up in California where she as a girl went to a Catholic school and was that taught non- Catholics were going to hell. She, as a non-Catholic and non-church goer, was terrified. When she moved as a young teenager to East Texas she became a member of a conservative evangelical Baptist church where she was taught that CATHOLICS were going to hell. It placed a big question mark in her soul.

But I want to take seriously the spirituality of those outside the church and outside the category of religious faith and belief. There are former Christians and former church goers who are deeply spiritual. Some are dedicated followers of Jesus in their own way. Some have found the spirituality of other religions most compelling to them. There are agnostics and atheists whose moral and

ethical lives are superior to mine. Many have argued that one has to have God to be good. That has been far from my experience, and most probably yours as well.

III

I turn us to our two gospel texts for today. In the first in Luke's gospel, a Roman centurion had a young servant who was sick and close to death. He was considered an unbeliever, but he was one who loved the Jewish people and had even built for them a synagogue. So he came to Jesus with their commendation. He knelt before Jesus and said, "Just say the word and let my servant be healed." I am a man under authority, he explained, and understand authority. So, just say the word and my servant back home will be healed. Then Jesus said: "I tell you in all Israel I have not seen such faith!" Such happened over and over in his ministry, as in his encounter with the Canaanite woman, Jesus seeing and honoring the faith of those outside the Jewish house of faith. When the soldier returned to his house the servant was healed. A long distance healing.

The other text comes from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew. Jesus says:

Not everyone who says to me "Lord, Lord" will enter the kingdom of heaven, but those who do the will of my Father who is in heaven.

Uncountable are those who have done and are doing what God desires whether they know and believe in God or not. And uncountable are the religiously comfortable who praise Jesus in church but whose ways are far from the way of Jesus.

Scottish theologian and novelist George MacDonald wrote of Jesus: “He will say to no one, ‘You never went to church: depart from me, I do not know you.’”

We should honor the religiously unaffiliated whose spiritual and moral lives make the world better.

IV

So why does a preacher say such things when he loves and has dedicated his whole life to the church? Because here we find meaning and find community. Here we carry on the story of Jesus. Here we pass along faith to our young and offer a home of faith to others. Here we offer ourselves to God in sincere worship, however stumblingly. It matters not whether we live in a cultural moment when church going is ascendant or in decline. We preach and live the gospel of Jesus “in season and out of season.”

Is there a silver lining to this cloud of church decline? It certainly calls us to re-examine our faith and church practices to see how we be a better community

of faith. Part of this situation is on us, and we may come through it a better people of God. The Archbishop of Canterbury, head of the Anglican Church, was interviewed recently about the great decline in Anglican Church affiliation. “How is the church responding?”, he was asked. He answered, “It has made us less bossy!”

Blessed are the churches that can add after their name, “A Non-Bossy Church!”

There is an important theology in the Bible, in both Testaments, called “remnant theology”. It says that in bad times for faith, God preserves a remnant of believers to carry on so that in future times faith may flower again. That might be our calling in such a time as this.