

WHERE IS EVERYBODY?

Acts 9:1-7; Mark 1:4-11

A few weeks ago Gene Lens gave me his copy of the November-December issue of Duke University's magazine. He thought I might be interested in an article titled, "Flagging Faith." This piece is about the research of one of Duke's professors, Mark Chaves, published in a new book, *American Religion: Contemporary Trends*. The conclusion reached in the book is that none of the indicators of traditional religious belief or practice are going up. There has been a steady, if slow, decline since the 1950's in the number of Americans who say they believe in God, from 99 percent to 92 percent. In the 1950's only 3 percent of Americans said they had no religious affiliation. Today it's about 18 percent, and the trend has gone up faster since 1990, with younger people more likely to say they have no religious affiliation. According to many polls, 40 percent of Americans attend religious services, but Chaves' survey finds the number closer to 25 percent, and the percentage of those who never attend religious services has increased. There is a steady decline in the number of those who report growing up with religiously active fathers, and it is less likely generally that Americans will grow up in religiously active households. As all this is taking place, Americans are more accepting of religious diversity and appreciative of other religions even as there has been a rather sharp decline in confidence in religious leaders. Those who attend worship weekly identify themselves as conservative; those who attend less regularly are not as conservative. There are almost two conservative Protestants (evangelicals) for every mainline Protestant (Protestants in

denominations like our own). Chaves thinks this is the case not because the percentage of evangelicals is rising but because the percentage of mainline Protestants has declined sharply. It is also the case that conservative Protestants have more children than do mainline Protestants. Finally, a growing number of people, especially younger people, identify themselves as “spiritual but not religious,” a distinction that is fairly vague and undefined but which probably means anti-institutional.

What are we to make of all this?

In the first place, let’s be clear that none of this has anything to do with the existence of God or what it makes sense to believe about God. This analysis is about what Americans do in the name of religion and specifically whether or not they attend religious observances, with special attention to whether or not Christians go to church. It does not, I think, matter to God if anybody goes to church. Church is not for God; it is for us. The worship of God, if we do it right, is so that we don’t end up worshiping ourselves or idolizing something that is unworthy of our devotion.

A year ago, I was getting ready to go away to New Zealand. New Zealand is still part of the British Commonwealth, and its history is largely that of a Christian nation. The Anglican Church had a significant impact in the making of New Zealand and is to this day virtually a state church. I would also say that New Zealand is a post-Christian country. The churches are largely empty, artifacts of the nation’s past. The evangelical churches do better with worship attendance, but I understand that there’s been a fall off there as well. The people who do attend the mainline churches are mostly older, but, as I say, not many attend. New Zealand is a social democracy, which is to say that many of peoples’ needs are met by the state. The Anglicans and the Salvation Army help with

certain crises and emergencies, but for the most part people do not generally look to the churches as support in time of trouble. Those who were brought up in the church have their training and memories of church and church teachings but see no reason to go to church unless it is for some special occasion like a wedding or funeral. From my observation, people generally do not believe they need or want what the church is offering.

None of this is to say that Kiwis are not spiritual in the sense of having a belief in God or some sort of transcendent Reality or thinking that it is good for one to meditate or pray or practice Yoga. They feel acutely their sense of obligation to one another's well-being and care deeply about the natural environment. But they are not religious. They do not seem to feel a need to learn and practice a particular faith. They don't think it is a punishable offense to be irreligious, and if there is a heaven, they reckon it is for anyone who is reasonably decent and wants to go. Their spiritual understanding is amiable as is their society. Could it be, religiously speaking, that we are headed toward something like that in this country?

Throughout history, it has often been the case that people hold on to their religion because they are afraid to let it go. The clergy and sages and shamans teach there would be a price to be paid if people didn't do the things their religion tells them to do, a terrible price, indeed, that there would be hell to pay. In many cases it was presumed that the religions spoke for God, so that if you offended against religious teachings, you offended against God. As these presumptions are called into question, people have shaken off their fears and found their religion to be unnecessary. If I don't need my religion to keep me

out of hell or get me into heaven, what do I need it for? What good is it? More than anything else, I suspect that it is the loss of fear that has emptied the pews.

I hope we can agree that religion is not a necessary condition for the afterlife and the Christian religion especially. But as Christians, we can go still farther than this and say that the idea that religion is necessary to win heaven is *against* the Christian teaching that God is gracious and that we are saved by grace and not by keeping religious laws. Such teaching is central to our faith and especially so as Lutherans. Ours is not a faith of rules to win God's favor, tallying up costs and benefits. Our faith is not about appeasing an angry God or wheedling favors from a Higher Power. But then, what is the Christian faith about? I'm glad you asked.

The Christian faith is about receiving the Holy Spirit and living by the Holy Spirit; or to put this a bit differently our faith is living a life of spiritual holiness. Living by the Holy Spirit is not some sort of undefined and amorphous spirituality, a new –age stew of good intentions. The Christian faith is a life lived in imitation of Christ Jesus. That is to say, a life that has at its center the love of God, the Creator of all things, and hence the love of creation and in particular the love of human creatures, our neighbors. It is a life committed to equity and which believes that the measure of a society is how the least in that society are treated. It is a life committed to the causes of justice and peace, deploring war-making and violence of all sorts. It is into such a life that Christians are baptized when they are baptized with the Holy Spirit. It is a life that takes a lifetime of practice and discovery, and for this, a community of support is necessary. The name of this community is “church.” And with this, we come back to where we began.

As you can see from my review of the article about the Duke professor's research into the decrease in religious belief and practice in the United States, Emanuel is not alone in the experience of empty pews. The reasons for this are complex, and the situation is troubling. But in good times or in bad, the important thing, the *crucial* thing in evaluating the worth of church and church attendance is whether or not the church is in word and deed faithful to the Holy Spirit of Christ. If it is, that church has a reason for being. If not, then perhaps it would be best if it ceased pretending. By this standard, I would say that Emanuel deserves to survive and even to thrive. But that's just me. Others may come to different conclusions. Apparently some others have. Amen.

Baptism of Our Lord, January 8, 2012

Emanuel Lutheran Church