

Why Do I Still Go to Church?
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
29 May, 2005
Rev. Paulo Gustavo França
Text: Romans 1:16-17; Matthew 7:21-29

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only one who does the will of my Father in heaven. [...] Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock.”

- Matthew 7:21 & 24

Prayer

Come Holy Spirit and open our hearts
To your presence within us
So we may draw near to our God.
Quiet our minds
And help us to hear God’s word
For this Church today.
May the meditation of all our hearts
And the words of my mouth
Be acceptable to you
O God, our rock and our salvation.
Amen!

In one of his most recent sermons, the Reverend John Buchanan, the senior pastor at the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago, spoke about one of the major cultural shifts this country has undergone over the last 35 years and how it has affected the status of mainline Protestant churches in American society. Needless to say, this topic quickly caught my attention and sent me running to all the books and other resources I could grab to find out more about this cultural shift.

Quoting Barbara Wheeler, the president of Auburn Theological Seminary in New York, Buchanan sustained that Americans **“have crossed a divide. Before, [he said] if you did not hold traditional religious beliefs and belonged to a church you felt obliged to explain yourself. Now the pressure is to explain why you [would be religious or affiliated with the church].”**¹

This change of attitude reveals part of a complex equation of sociological and historic factors that are eroding the predominance of the traditional mainline denominations in the United States. The very term **“mainline”**

¹ Buchanan, John. Sermon delivered at Fourth Church on May 15, 2005 – “Who Needs a Church?”

has become a misnomer; since it conveys the idea of cultural, economic and sociopolitical dominance these denominations can no longer claim to exert. The stately presence of our church buildings with their massive towers and tall steeples still reminds us of days of yore when Episcopalians, United Methodists, Lutherans and Presbyterians wielded unmatched influence over the hearts, minds and souls of Americans. But things have changed! Across the country, scores of churches have witnessed a steady decline in their membership rolls and many congregations are now gasping for air. Surveys show that by the 1990's mainline Protestant churches had lost between one-fifth and one-third of the membership they claimed to have in the mid-1960's.² Buchanan, who grew up in the Presbyterian Church, says that until the early 1900's if you were born into a Presbyterian family, you would probably keep your religious affiliation throughout your life and you would most likely have children who would also be Presbyterians.³ Nowadays that is unheard of.

After World War II, Baby Boomers decided they wanted a religion of their own rather than that of their parents and, consequently, denominational loyalties evaporated. People began to drop out of church and entire families became completely estranged from mainline denominations.

What ensued from this exodus that left the pews of mainline churches empty is what some scholars call **“a homemade religious product.”**⁴ In other words, in the absence of established religious beliefs and dogmas, Baby Boomers came up with a kind of post-modern folk religion. This private, usually syncretistic, “new personal religion” emerged slowly as the result of the greater individual autonomy that got under way in the 1960's, which dislodged the religious authority that used to be invested in the big institutional church and placed it on the individual. Followers of this “homemade religion” prefer to call themselves “spiritual people” and they intentionally shun the labels that might associate them with any particular denomination. What matters for them is their personal search for a spiritual path that will nourish their souls and will help them and their children to be “good people” without being necessarily religious. As a matter of fact, these people are practicing what has become the favorite religion in the United States: a private and personal spirituality characterized by the loss of certainty about a lot of things, which allows the individual to pick and choose what he or she believes without being nudged out of his or her comfort zones. In

² Johnson, Benton; Hoge, Dean R. & Luidens, Donald A. “Mainline Churches: The Real Reason for Decline” (First Things: The Journal of Religion, Culture, and Public Life, 1993) pp. 13-18.

³ Buchanan, John. Sermon delivered at Fourth Church on May 15, 2005 – “Who Needs a Church?”

⁴ Johnson, Benton; Hoge, Dean R. & Luidens, Donald A. “Mainline Churches: The Real Reason for Decline” (First Things: The Journal of Religion, Culture, and Public Life, 1993) pp. 13-18.

this “homemade spirituality” there is no authority beyond each persons’ values, priorities, personal needs and desires. Since this is really all about “YOU,” you create your spirituality in your image and likeness and there is no need for the community of faith to stand between you and God. This is individualism in its most virulent form and it explains in part why so many people have left the church.

Whether this powerful tidal wave of Post-modern individualism will eventually subside and a new cultural shift will bring people back to mainline churches is unpredictable and, some sociologists say, very unlikely to happen in the foreseeable future. Therefore, those of us who are part of mainline churches will have to accept the reality that we are a church at a crossroad. For the first time in the history of this country, “mainline Christians” are not running the show and we will have to figure out a way to continue to be the church in this unfamiliar place.

Of course, we can always huddle together and cling to each other in fear of the changes that are happening around us while bemoaning the fact that we are not as big and powerful as we used to be. We can close our doors to the outside world and live off our endowments even as we speak nostalgically amongst ourselves about the heyday of our congregations when worship services were always full and the prospect of a sharp fall in the number of members and empty pews was unimaginable. I am convinced that if we choose this path, we will be simply wasting our time and energy on keeping old wheels running and we will not withstand the winds, rains and floods of the cultural forces that beat against us. We will fall – and great will be our fall!

There is a better way to face the current crisis the church is facing. As disciples of Christ, we can seek to discern what God has in mind for us today without trying to relive a bygone era. We can shake off our old ways of doing things and let the Spirit of God animate and enliven our ministries and mission so we may continue to do the will of our Father in heaven courageously and without any trepidation. For as the religious scholar Elizabeth Stuart says, “**The Church always moves forward through crisis. Crises are times when cracks appear in the Church through which the Holy Spirit pours.**”⁵ Some see these cracks with alarm and exasperation saying that they are draining away the very life of our congregations. I see them as clean pores that will let us breathe and absorb the nourishment that will keep us well and alive.

I believe that, as mainline churches are pushed to the sidelines by external cultural trends, God will take the Church back to its roots, the very source of its reason to exist. We only have to let the Spirit lead us. In the words of Henri Nouwen, “[The] religious community, [the church], which means called out of the land of slavery to the free land is constantly moving away

⁵ Quotation from “Courage to Love” – collection of prayers (Pilgrim Press)

from the *status quo*, searching for what is beyond the here and now. As soon as the community becomes sedentary, it is tempted to lose its faith and worship the house-gods instead of the one true God who is leading it in a pillar of fire.”⁶ Perhaps as mainline Christians begin to experience what it means to be at the margin of society, we may also learn to look at the world from a completely different standpoint and we may find that God is calling us to do ministry in ways and places that we might have never even contemplated when we were part of the *status quo*.

More importantly, some of us may finally ask ourselves why we still come to church at a time of so many “homemade religious” options.

Ann Lamott explains in her book, “Traveling Mercies,” why she made her son Sam go to Church when he was a child. Lamott says, “**The main reason is that I want to give him what I found in the world, which is to say a path and a little light to see by. Most of the people I know who have what I want – which is to say, purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, joy – are people with a deep sense of spirituality. They are people in community, who pray, or practice their faith; they are Buddhists, Jews, Christians – people banding together to work on themselves and for human rights. They follow a brighter light than the glimmer of their own candle; they are part of something beautiful.**”⁷ And then she goes on to talk about her own church – St. Andrews Presbyterian Church in Marine City, California, “**Our funky little church is filled with people who are working for peace and freedom, who are out there on the streets and inside praying, and they are home writing letters, and they are at the shelters with giant platters of food.**”⁸

Lamott, who found her way back to the Church after leading a troubled life of drug and alcohol addiction, knows how special this community – the Church - is. She recounts in her book, “**When I was at the end of my rope, the people at St. Andrews tied a knot in it for me and helped me hold on. The Church became my home in the old meaning of *home*.**”

This is also why I still come to church!

When I went to seminary, my father, who is not religious, could not understand why anyone in his sound mind would choose to dedicate his life to the service of the Church. He even asked me, “**What is it that religious people do or say that is of any relevance to the world?**” What my father never understood is that I found in the church - this wonderful and exasperating institution - a solid place to stand and to be in community. For it is here where I

⁶ Nouwen, Henri. *Intimacy*, p. 102.

⁷ Lamott, Anne. *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (Anchor Books: New York, 1999) p. 100.

⁸ *Ibid*

see the love and grace of God daily as I join each one of you in worship and in service. It is here that my spirit is fed and where I am constantly challenged to move beyond the confines of my comfort zones to learn how I can become more fully human. It is in this institution where I can sit together with some of our oldest members at the Honor Diner and listen with joy and fascination to their rich life stories and how the church has had such a crucial role in their faith journey. It is here that I find hope for the present and the future because I know that our faith in a loving and caring God puts us on that rock where the floods, rains, and winds of life cannot reach us; but if they do, I know that I have a bunch of brothers and sisters holding the other end of the rope that can pull me back to this solid and sacred ground safely. In this age of untrammelled individualism the church rescues me from the abyss of vanity, self-infatuation, loneliness and despair. It teaches me what Leonardo Boff, the Brazilian Roman Catholic theologian, said so wisely, **“the cross of life is heavier the more it is borne in solitude. And we need so little to relieve it! All we need is for someone to approach and stand by our side. A few words, something whispered, a pat on the shoulder are enough. Sometimes just sitting together and sharing a cup serves to mend the torn fabric of our life.”**⁹

The Church has placed many patches on the fabric of my life and this is why I am still here and have no intention to leave. This is why I am not ashamed to say that I believe God has called this community to speak of God's love, grace and salvation to a society steeped in self-absorption and materialism. And as Anne Lamott puts it in her new book, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*, **“You’ve got to love this in a God – consistently assembling the motleyest people to bring, into the lonely and frightening world, a commitment to caring and community. It’s a centuries-long reality show – Moses the stutterer, Rahab the hooker, David the adulterer, Mary the homeless teenager. Not to mention the mealy-mouthed disciples. Not to mention a raging insecure narcissist like me”**¹⁰ And why not to say, “Not to mention each one of us here this morning!” Then some people wonder why the church is so wonderful and exasperating at the same time!

Friends, let us stand firm on the rock of our salvation and let us not be discouraged by these momentary challenges the Church is facing now. Let us take to heart Paul's advice to the Philippians: “This one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.”¹¹

May it be so here at Fairmount Church. Amen!

⁹ Boff, Leonardo. *Caminho de Esperança*.

¹⁰ Lamott, Anne. *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith* (Riverhead Books: New York 2005) p. 22.

¹¹ Philippians 3:13c-14.