

Menifee United Church of Christ

Established in 1962 by God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit

SERMON FOR

June 7, 2015

“Where Have All The Christians Gone”



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Live Life Fully Alive!

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Rev. Bill Freeman

2 Corinthians 4:15-18

Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God. So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.

Mark 3:31-35

Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, 'Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.' And he replied, 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' And looking at those who sat around him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.'

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"Where Have All The Christians Gone"

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Three men died and went to heaven. Jesus met them at the Pearly Gates. Jesus asked the first man, "How many times did you cheat on your wife?" The first man said, "I never cheated on my wife." Jesus said, "For never cheating on your wife, I'm giving you a Lincoln Continental to drive around in heaven." The first man said, "Thank you Jesus. I'm going to look for my wife, who died a couple years ago." Then Jesus asked the second man, "How many times did you cheat on your wife?" The second man said, "I cheated on my wife twice." Jesus said, "For cheating on your wife twice, I'm giving you a Ford Pinto to drive around in heaven." Then Jesus asked the third man, "How many times did you cheat on your wife?" The third man said, "I

cheated on my wife 8 times.” Jesus said, “For cheating on your wife 8 times, I’m giving you a Corvair to drive around in heaven.” A couple hours later the second and third men saw the first man sitting in his Lincoln Continental, crying. They asked him, “Why are you crying? You get to drive around in heaven in a Lincoln Continental!” The first man said, “I just saw my wife and she was riding a bicycle!”

Where have all the Christians gone? That’s what I want to talk with you about today. Where have all the Christians gone? This is an important topic, whether you drive a Lincoln Continental or a Ford Pinto. Where have all the Christians gone? This is an important topic, whether you drive a Corvair or ride a bicycle. Where have all the Christians gone? This is an important topic, whether you take the bus or walk. Where have all the Christians gone? You may have heard that a recent survey showed that the percentage of Americans who claim to be Christians has dropped from about 78% to around 70%. At the same time, the percentage of Americans who claim no religious affiliation - who are called the “nones,” and who are often young people - has increased, from about 16% to around 22%. Church attendance has also been declining over the years, especially among young people. Over the next few minutes I hope to give you at least three reasons why, I believe, people are leaving the Christian Church and some possible ways to grow the Christian Church in general and this Progressive Christian church in particular.

I pastored a church once, a United Church of Christ church, which was in a very small town. I probably shouldn’t have been there, because I was pretty progressive and they were not progressive at all. In Bible Study we read the first chapter of the Book of Genesis. You know, the universe, the earth, and humankind were all created in six days. I said, “Of course, this is not a science textbook. Scientists now tell us that the universe, the earth, and humankind have all been evolving over billions of years.” The moderator of the church - the moderator of the church - said, “Well, I believe in Creationism. I believe the universe, the earth, and humankind were all created in six days, 6,000 years ago.” And I’m saying to myself, “Homina, homina, homina.”

Anti-intellectualism, I believe, is why some people - including some young people - have left the Christian church. They don't like churches that claim that the universe, the earth, and humankind were all created in six days, 6,000 years ago. They're more intellectual than that. They learned in school that the universe, the earth, and humankind have all been evolving over billions of years. They want the truth. They can handle the truth. And as Jesus said, "you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." Now I admit that I can't explain why some Christian churches have thousands of people in their pews - including some young people - even though those churches claim that the universe, the earth, and humankind were all created in six days, 6,000 years ago. Maybe some people like churches that can't handle the truth. I don't know. All I know is, if Progressive Christian churches, like this one, want to grow, they have to be an alternative for people who believe: Thinking is not a sin, the truth is not scary, and as Jesus said, "the truth will set you free."

The late Christian minister Jerry Falwell said, shortly after the tragic events of 9/11, that God was made "mad" and "allowed" 9/11 to happen, because gays want to marry, feminists want to control their own bodies, and some people want to be atheists. Jerry Falwell said, "I point the finger in their face and say, 'You helped this happen.'" Christian broadcaster Pat Robertson agreed. Both men later, under much public pressure, apologized.

Intolerance, I believe, is why some people - including some young people - have left the Christian church. They don't like churches that are intolerant of gays, feminists, and atheists. They're more tolerant than that. They have friends who are gays, feminists, and atheists. They believe what the Bible says, "that grace...extends to more and more people...to the glory of God." Now I admit that I can't explain why some Christian churches have thousands of people in their pews - including some young people - even though those churches are intolerant of gays, feminists, and atheists. Maybe some people like churches that are intolerant of other people. I don't know. All I know is, if Progressive Christian churches, like this one, want to grow, they have to be an alternative for people who believe: Tolerance is not a sin, God's "grace" abounds, and as my favorite pope, Pope Francis, says, if atheists do good, he'll meet them in heaven.

A progressive Protestant had a friendly rivalry with a conservative Catholic. True story. I knew them both. They would kid each other about their faiths. The conservative Catholic would imply that the progressive Protestant was a stuffy intellectual. And the progressive Protestant would imply that the conservative Catholic was very superstitious. When they would see each other, the conservative Catholic would say to the progressive Protestant, "How were things Sunday at the lecture hall?" The progressive Protestant would say to the conservative Catholic, "Great! How were things Sunday at the magic show?" While theirs was a friendly rivalry, not all religious rivalries are friendly.

Exclusivity, I believe, is why some people - including some young people - have left the Christian church. They don't like churches that think they're better than Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims. And even better than other Christians. They're more inclusive than that. They have friends who are Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims. And even Christians. They believe what Jesus says, that, "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." Now I admit that I can't explain why some Christian churches have thousands of people in their pews - including some young people - even though those churches think they're better than Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims. And even better than other Christians. Maybe some people like churches that think they're better than others. I don't know. All I know is, if Progressive Christian churches, like this one, want to grow, they have to be an alternative for people who believe: Inclusivity is not a sin; religion should be about cooperation, not competition; and as Jesus said, all people who do the will of God are "my brother, and sister, and mother."

This church has been like a microcosm of the Christian church as a whole. What's been happening to the Christian Church over the years, with a steady decline of members, has been happening to this church. If you look at the attendance at our Sunday services for the past 15 years, there has been an almost uncanny, steady reduction in the number of people in our pews. About 15 years ago there were around 200 people in worship. Each year after that, the number of people in worship dropped by about 10.

So, 15 years ago there were 200 people in worship, 14 years ago there were 190 people in worship, 13 years ago there were 180 people in worship, and so on, and so on, and so on, until today, when we average about 60 people in worship. But, and it's a big but, there is some good news. Over the past nine months, 11 people have become members of this church. We're going to have a membership class over the next several weeks, beginning today, and a couple of people have indicated to me that they want to join this church. Each week I give away one to three Bibles to first time visitors. Some of those first-time visitors have kept coming back and become regular attendees. Our weekly donations have increased compared to a year ago. So, as Jesse Jackson says, "Keep hope alive."

How can this church grow numerically and financially? I can think of only two ways. We have to grow spiritually and compassionately. To grow spiritually we have to help people inside this church to live life fully alive in body, mind, and spirit. And to grow compassionately, we have to help people outside this church to live life fully alive in body, mind, and spirit. How do we and others live life fully alive in body, mind, and spirit? I believe we have to follow the words of the prophet Micah and, "do justice...love kindness...and walk humbly with God." To do all that, this church needs the help of God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and you.

Let us pray...

God of Love,

Help us to grow this church spiritually and compassionately.

Help us to grow this church numerically and financially.

And help us to grow this church by doing your will.

Now and forevermore.

By the power of the Holy Spirit.

And in the name of Jesus.

Amen.



*Whoever you are,
Wherever you are on life's journey
You are welcome here!*

*Jesus didn't reject people
Neither do we*



THE GOLDEN RULE

*What is hateful to you
do not do to others.*
Judaism

*Do to others what you would
have them do to you.*
Christianity

*None of you believes until he wishes for his
brother what he wishes for himself.*
Islam

*Do not do to others
what would cause pain if done to you.*
Hinduism

*Hurt not others in ways that you yourself
would find hurtful.*
Buddism

*Regard your neighbor's gain as your gain,
and your neighbor's loss as your loss.*
Taoism

*Do not do to others
what you do not want them to do to you.*
Confucianism

*Treat other people
as you'd want to be treated in their situation.*
Humanism