

#AlternativeFaith: All is Not Lost

Matthew 5:3, 6:19-23

As you may know, over the past year I've been thinking, preaching, and writing about the decline of white Christian culture in our society, especially after reading Robert Jones' 2016 bestseller, *The End of White Christian America*. It's a topic that has grabbed my interest for several reasons, most notably the fact that it describes well the downward trend I've witnessed in Christian denominations and churches throughout my lifetime. We are not the churches we once were fifty-plus years ago. This is noticeable from the pew as well, as fewer people attend worship than in the past or regularly participate in the life of local churches and denominational gatherings, especially in circles that are predominantly white/Caucasian.

The reasons behind this decline are myriad, ranging from the large scale changes in American culture over the past few generations (increased secularism and religious pluralism, a lessening of moral authority as a fallout from corruption and scandals in religious institutions, the changing nature of Sundays from a universal Sabbath to a normal day for business and activity, scientific and academic, along with social and cultural, challenges to traditional religious beliefs) to the more personal (more emphasis on individual freedom of choice, greater demands on time and income in many households, the fragmented state of many families), along with a number of other adjustments Americans have made in culture and lifestyle. As a rule, these changes have impacted everyone, but white congregations more than any other.

This isn't anything new to those of us in the northeast, where we have mimicked the European trends toward the social marginalization of

Christianity much longer than is evident in other parts of the country, particularly the Midwest and South. And, it should be noted, there are still mainline and evangelical congregations which buck the trend and are growing and expanding their public presence, but they are at best a small minority. As a rule, the days when there were packed churches on every street corner now lie in the past and a sizeable segment of our society is opting out of religion altogether. As a result, the number continues to increase of predominantly white congregations that downsize their staffs or hire only part-time pastors, or merge with other churches or shutter their doors for good. The decline of White Christian America is evident all around us.

Across the board, this reality is of great concern and worry among church folk. The future doesn't look bright. "Decline" easily translates into a foreboding sense of failure, with frustration and resentment being directed inwardly and outwardly. So blame is commonly directed toward stubborn traditionalists who resist modernizing worship, or toward the "Scrooges" who underfund the church's budget; or complaints will target aging clergy who are considered increasingly irrelevant; or blame is cast at parents and grandparents who don't insist on kids coming to Sunday School, or toward religious consumers who only support the church when they want or need something. Then there are those who will just blame secular culture, or the liberal media, or even the ACLU—blame someone or something for why Christianity is failing to be the dominant presence it once was in America, when it seemed everyone went to church, the Ten Commandments were as good as law and Jesus was the de facto Lord of the land. Hardly a week passes when I don't get something in the mail from a Christian organization or evangelist decrying the erosion of Christian

values—who are nostalgic for better times, complaining that America has become critically poor in spirit in the 21st century and the moral chaos in our country is evidence of our turning away from God.

That is precisely what many people think across the fruited plain. It helps explain much of the rise in social conservatism over the past few decades and even some of the defiance that has been unleashed by the recent campaign of Donald Trump. They look back to when most Americans shared the same values, behaved in similar ways, and stood up for American Christian culture—the culture of the dominant white majority. The imperial dominance of Christianity is the realm they remember best in the land of the free and the home of the brave. Beyond the anger, though, there's a crisis of confidence in many parts of White Christian America who fear, without resistance, all will be lost! America, as a moral beacon in a dark world, will no longer shine.

As a pastor, I empathize with those feeling loss and worry myself about the future with it becoming tougher to stay the course with eroding support for local churches and national denominations. But I think the defiance, in particular, is misdirected. This is not a time to rise up in anger over the loss of religious institutions and influence, but rather a watershed moment to return to the very roots and transforming power of our faith in spiritual communities.

It's been well-documented that the underlying cause behind the decline in White Christian America is not a rejection of spirituality (or even the Christian faith itself), but of how it's been presented, preserved, and packaged in American culture and by Christendom down through the ages. For centuries, the Christian witness has depended far too much on institutional power and having a prominent and privileged status in human

society—akin to being a part of the very principalities and powers that Jesus himself resisted and challenged.

What we are losing in the present time is not the faith itself, but the dominant institutional power and presence of it in society. The decline is forcing us to make the necessary distinctions between beliefs rooted in Jesus and his teachings from that which merely reflects our interests as a religious organization or institution. What I mean is, are we able to embrace the teachings of Jesus for what they are—as moral and ethical points of resistance against the idolatry and imperial interests that existed in his world and are evident in our own time? Are we able to grasp the difference between the Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount and the Lord who is called upon to save white Christian America? I hope so, but I know it will take the loss of our status and privilege in society and perhaps grappling with the poverty of our own spirits, individually and collectively, before we will fully grasp what is at stake in these times.

With this in mind, let me turn to our texts for today. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Which is to say, how fortunate (how delighted, how empowered) are those who are hopeless and filled with despair from what is overwhelming them in life for they will be open to the message and meaning of God’s realm. That might be an unexpected turn of phrase, but I think it makes perfect sense. When you are at a loss and feeling empty, then you are ready to be filled; when you are bereft of certainty or belief, then you are looking for substantive truth and alternative faith. It’s how life shows us the way forward more than we might realize. When we’re vulnerable and lacking confidence, then we’re more open to change. It often takes a life-altering loss before we are able to perceive the shortcomings, mistakes, misunderstandings, and failures of

the path we've taken so we can reorient ourselves to wiser ways. Being poor in spirit brings with it many teachable moments.

So, if the Christian witness as we've known in this society and embraced it in life is failing us, then what about it has gone wrong? Where has it failed us? Why are we in decline and losing spirit?

Let me suggest just one area that will require new thinking in congregational life and identity that directly relates to a point of resistance that Jesus most commonly addressed:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in or steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

What do Jesus' words mean in relation to how we express the real intent and values of the Gospel? Let me put it this way: what role does money and possessions play in the life of the average Christian? How much property do Christian churches and organizations own? How much power does Mammon exert in the values and priorities of individual Christians and churches?

This hits at the heart of life, does it not? Just in the U.S. alone, religious institutions (the vast majority being Christian) own property estimated to be worth in total nearly a trillion dollars! That's no small material possession, especially since it's been estimated \$90 billion in taxes could be collected annually in property owned by religious congregations and institutions alone!¹ How long do we figure our tax-exempt status will remain, especially in cash-strapped states, cities, and towns? We might rightfully push back and claim all the good we're doing. That may work in white Christian America where we've enjoyed a privileged status, but it's

¹ Dylan Matthews, "You give Religions more than \$82.5 Billion a Year," *The Washington Post*. August 22, 2013.

not as persuasive in an increasingly non-religious society. Frankly, if we were truly being good stewards and following Jesus' teachings, why wouldn't congregations opt for sharing multi-use facilities, instead of maintaining exclusive and expensive properties? Why are we so materialistic?

It's not off the mark to wonder if Christianity's collective and historic fascination with large, often opulent, buildings has less to do with glorifying God than it does with an idolatrous need to express power and significance in the world—often in association with the ruling powers and imperial interests. Consider how many resources could be used more prudently and effectively down through the ages had they been invested in the people Jesus valued, instead of the idols of each era? Then imagine how much time, energy, and expense goes into maintaining and protecting that which we own?

Can you sense how different the world would be today—what good news we would proclaim—if we could have done this right from the beginning, challenging materialism instead of being agents of it—if we could have helped the world not to bow before its golden idols and sacrificing all too many lives to protect them? Our buildings are symbolic of Christianity's sacred cows.

Materialism in all of its manifestations truly is the Faustian flaw for Christendom—an idolatry that has undermined the meaning and blunted the impact of so much of what Jesus taught. The evidence is everywhere. Instead of a freedom in life, people feel overly burdened by the very things they yearn for, but must protect—idols they must value, money that is never enough. People can so easily be possessed by their possessions, individually and collectively—ourselves included. Materialism invariably

will darken the soul over fears of losing it—having it violated or stolen—creating walls of distrust between people. Once the eyes of the soul view the world as untrustworthy and insecure, life becomes ever darker, the future unknown, and the heart is less generous, secure, and merciful, and light. And that brings about a poverty of spirit.

Had Christianity gotten this right from the start, we would have taken Jesus' words to heart and presented the faith as a relief from all that ails human civilization and its social and economic orders. The Gospel would be good news for all the victims and refugees of imperial and economic power—embracing both the poor and the poor in spirit, restoring their spirits with the good news that all is not lost. The beloved community of Christ is a safe place for generous sharing; we express an alternative faith. Had we done that consistently and well, there would be a real sense of the presence of God in the community that reflects eternity's values, i.e., the kingdom of heaven on earth.

I realize that, despite our Faustian flaws, somehow Jesus' teachings and intent have still gotten through to certain degree, even if they're not reflected well in the conventions and mores of "Christian" societies, or in the churches and religious institutions that exist. Even though the evidence of decline will bring alarm to many, in so many areas it can be a mercy and an opportunity to do things right; it will generate new life among the poor and the poor in spirit!

That's how I'd like us to see it—we who gather in this Meetinghouse we call our spiritual home. Remember, though, this building has never been the church—*we are the church*. We've enjoyed the luxury of carrying out our ministry here in this place; but there may come a day when we can

no longer afford it, yet we will still be Christ's church wherever we prudently share space with others.

We will still welcome the poor and the poor in spirit—the refugees and victims, like ourselves, of a materialistic world that prizes power, possessions, and privilege over people. If we are faithful to Jesus' word and life, we will offer an alternative faith to the conventional religiosity of this world—one that we treasure by following Jesus of Nazareth—the radical prophet who revealed the nature of God to us, who will fill our hearts with love and generosity for one another in community and set all fear-bound spirits free.

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