



“Serving the World, Finding Our Soul”
Scripture – John 21:15-21
Sermon preached by Dr. Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, November 19, 2017

Scrambling to attract new members, some congregations have tried to reinvent themselves. Living in a therapeutic age in which we are encouraged to think only positive thoughts, admitting sin might dent one’s self-esteem, so some have banished prayers of confession from their liturgy. Some churches have removed crosses from their premises. In a culture where people feel queasy talking about death, a cross is too stark a reminder. Our culture is into pop music, not classical, so many have tossed out Bach and switched to contemporary music. However, some congregations have gone even further.

How many of you know about the Cowboy Church in Ellis County Texas? I had not heard of it until recently, so I visited their website. It appears that members of the staff are very open minded – you can wear either a white cowboy hat or a black cowboy hat. If any of you men find yourself in that area, which is not too far south of Dallas and you attend their Sunday worship, you will look like a fool if you wear a tie. It will also be a dead giveaway that you will not be staying after church for the open ride in their arena next to the sanctuary. You might get away with wearing slacks to worship, but if you want to fit in, blue jeans are the order of the day. And in case you are wondering about the music, it appears they play both kinds – country and western.

On Monday nights they have a brief worship service in their arena from 7:30 – 8:00 pm, and as long as you attend worship, you can stay to practice roping for free. Now, that’s a good deal! From 8:00 to 9:00 you can practice roping a machine, and from 9:00 to 10:00 you can rope live cattle. But, if you do not attend worship, the roping will cost you twenty bucks. Now, there’s an incentive to worship!

On Tuesday nights, you can attend their singles group – or practice barrel racing. Thursday night looks like a great couple’s night. That’s when they have the Ladies Bible Study and “Buck Out” which is steer riding, bull riding, and bronc riding. I do not want to single out the Cowboy Church, but I could not find a single word about ministries to people who are hungry, homeless, or suffering.

In every denomination and in every state, you can find congregations that have reduced the church to a social club for like-minded people. Fellowship with other Christians is a vital part of faith, but it is only one piece of what God intends the church to be. Jesus said, “For if you only love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?” Jesus wants to push us beyond our walls to share God’s love with people who are hurting.

Priest and author, Gerard W. Hughes tells an imaginary story about Jesus visiting a family in our world today. “The family is absolutely thrilled to have Jesus in their home. They are so thrilled that they decide to throw a

party to introduce him to their friends. They love showing off Jesus. The party is a great success. The problem comes when Jesus decides to stay. In fact, he decides to move in! This is very different from throwing a party. Jesus begins to bring all sorts of questionable types from the city streets back to the house. A lot of food is being consumed. The neighbors begin to complain about plunging property values. It becomes far too demanding for the family. But then, one of them has a bright idea. When Jesus is having his afternoon siesta, they will brick up his bedroom door. Then they will place a little altar in front of it, with beautiful candlesticks and a silver crucifix, and every time they pass the bedroom they will genuflect. This is how to deal with Jesus!"¹

Some reduce the church to a place where Jesus is venerated as a holy icon. They pray to have their sins forgiven, for inner peace, for people who suffer, and for their personal desires. They pray and praise, but they do not follow Jesus into the world.

Some want the Christian Church to focus only on personal spiritual growth. They want the church to help them develop a more robust prayer life and a more mature understanding of the Bible. Both are admirable goals. But, when the church focuses exclusively on helping individuals feel closer to God, it ceases to become the church. Jesus said that "those who want to save their life will lose it, but those who lose their life for his sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."

Today's passage comes at the end of the Gospel of John. Following the resurrection, seven of the remaining eleven disciples are in a boat offshore. They have been casting their nets into the deep blue the entire night, but have yet to land a single fish. In the early morning as the night gives way to the light of a new day, Jesus appears on the shore and calls out to them. He instructs them to throw their nets off the starboard side of their vessel. When they do, they catch so many fish that their nets nearly rip.

The disciples come to shore and gather around a charcoal fire where Jesus serves them breakfast. After they finish, Jesus questions Peter: "Do you love me?" Peter replies, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus says, "Feed my lambs." Jesus questions Peter a second time, "Do you love me?" Peter again replies, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus says, "Tend my sheep." A third time Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me?" Peter replies, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." And Jesus says, "Feed my sheep."

This is the Gospel of John's commissioning scene. Jesus will no longer be present with his followers so he calls on them to pick up where he left off. The world is full of people who are hungry and hurting, Jesus calls on us to tend to them.

Elsewhere, Jesus said that those who follow him are to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. He calls on us to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to welcome the stranger and to visit the ill. The church is not an institution created simply for the purpose of nurturing the private devotion of its members. Followers of Jesus are called to band together in the church to partner with God in healing the world. Moreover, there is a huge void in our souls if we are not engaged in serving others. There is a yearning within each of us to be loved and to love. We are incomplete and forever frustrated if we do not reach out in love to someone else. And deep, satisfying joy eludes us if we never take the opportunity to serve others.

While providing food and shelter is critical, serving others is more than simply hand-outs. It includes helping people develop a sense of self-determination. It includes tackling the multitude of problems that create a culture of violence. It includes improving schools and creating jobs and overcoming racism. The church is to be both a voice to our society of the need to work for the common good, and an institution that provides a variety of opportunities for its members to dedicate themselves to improving the lot of others.

A colleague shares the following story. "Along a windswept and rocky coastline there were a great many shipwrecks. The survivors of these shipwrecks were forever in need of rescue from the icy waters. They needed

food, warm shelter, and some loving reassurance after their ordeal. To accomplish this, numerous lifesaving stations grew up along the coast. Volunteers gave their time and resources, often risking their lives for others. They braved the surf in their lifeboats to rescue the drowning. They fed, housed and comforted countless storm-tossed survivors.”

“As the centuries passed, many of these life-saving stations grew in reputation as safe havens from the storms of life. The members of the life-saving stations enjoyed each other’s company, solidified friendships in their meetings, and drew strength from their club ceremonies. But, as time rolled by, some members suggested that risking your neck in small boats for the sake of strangers was foolish. ‘People who put out to sea ought to know the risks they’re taking and accept responsibility for themselves. After all, is their safety really *our* problem?’”

“Other members noted that the survivors who washed up on the beach made a real mess in the life-saving stations. They were wet and sick, and besides, all the food and blankets and lifeboats were a strain on the budget.”

“Some of the stations stopped sending out boats, and no longer offered care for the survivors of storms. They continued to have meetings where they enjoyed each other’s company and held their traditional ceremonies. But outside their doors, the storms still blew and people still needed to be rescued.”²

Dr. James Doty is a neurosurgeon and professor at Stanford. His research has concluded what many surmise. “Empathy is hardwired into our species...When we take care of each other, the pleasure centers of our brains light up.”³

Jesus did not call on his followers to love and serve others because he demanded obedience to arbitrary standards. He knew that we are meaning-hungry creatures and self-focus is ultimately unsatisfying. When you give yourself to saving someone from a storm, healing a wound, or righting a wrong, you can feel that ever-elusive joy that comes with being in harmony with God. If you want a deep and loving relationship with God, find someone who needs you.

NOTES

1. John Philip Newell, *The Rebirthing of God*, (Woodstock, Vermont: Christian Journeys, 2014), p.24.
2. Michael Lindvall, “Actions Speak Louder Than Words,” June 11, 2017.
3. Susanna Schrobsdorff, “The Pursuit of Happyish,” *Time*, September 18, 2017.

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

Shepherding God —

You are faithful to us in all things! Our guardian and guide, you hold us up as we wander the shadowed valleys of life; you lead us to quiet places so we can find respite and renewal; you set blessing before us and welcome us to the feast of grace. Your love for us is like that of a shepherd: protective, encompassing, challenging, persistent. For this gift, we give thanks!

And your desire is that such love fills every corner of this wide world. You call us to feed and tend your flock — to care for *all* you have created and claimed.

We strive to show your love through the prayers of our hearts, the words of our mouths, the deeds of our hands. Help us, O God, to do all these faithfully.

We pray for your sheep throughout the world, many of whom suffer from devastating disasters, entrenched conflict, or debilitating poverty. We lift before you the communities of Iran and Iraq, who have lost lives and livelihoods to last week's earthquake, as well as our mission partners in Congo, Guatemala, and the Middle East. For these and all your children — hear our prayers, O God.

We pray for those across our nation — from the streets of Wilmington, to the rural roads of northern California. In the wake of another shooting, we are especially mindful of the countless families whose lives have been forever altered due to violence. For these, and all your children — hear our prayers, O God.

We pray for those we hold dear — our family, our friends, our community of faith. We seek your peace for those who grieve, your comfort for those who are ill, your hope for those who despair. For these, and all your children — hear our prayers, O God.

Shepherding God — You call us to feed and tend your flock. Guide us, we pray, as we strive to serve Christ both near and far: Give us grace, so that we might surround those in our care with the embracing love of a shepherd. Give us generosity, so that we might foster compassionate communities in our neighborhoods and throughout our land. And give us the imagination and courage to work for justice throughout this wide world, so that your entire flock might flourish.

We lift this prayer in the name of Christ — the one who claims and calls us — and offer now the words he taught us:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name,
thy kingdom come, thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, and the power,
and the glory, forever. Amen.**